

Matthew 2: 1-12

There is no precedent for this strange visitation – not, at least, for the sake of a single child. That the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob might reach outside the family; that the likes of Herod would take seriously this revelation to those beyond the boundaries of the promised land; that public policy, and private devotion, could be so intimately connected - this is the stuff of dreams. But Scripture is the place where, for the faithful, dreams and reality exist comfortably, side by side. Divine reality and human reality are shown (in Scripture) to be woven tightly together - this is the stuff of faith. And in this morning's gospel lesson, the wise visitors, the Holy family, and the paranoid egomaniac in charge of Palestinian public affairs, are each challenged by a particular intrusion of God into human consciousness. There is a shared sense of awe¹ that permits an exploration of the possible by all concerned - though each for their own reasons. There is a willingness to discover that thing which becomes, in time "EPIPHANY" - the sudden, life-changing awareness of something that has been brought to your attention...²

Here, to Herod's palace, come camels laden with tribute. We are introduced to travellers who seek the truly wondrous – a king whose reign will be like no other -curious and learned observers of heavenly signs who announce to Jerusalem's tyrant-in-residence "... we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (Matt 2:2). This takes something more than courage; to arrive at the palace seeking a king that is not in residence. A new king. A heaven-sent king. These *Magi* from the East are curiously faithful (and wonderfully naïve). They are energized by their discovery - their epiphany.

We should remember that these visitors - while not 'of the faith' - are the best kind of faithful people. They possess a humility that lets them admit they do not have all the answers. They are properly suspicious of an arrogantly powerful authority figure. They have proven to be open to the urging of the spirit – we might prefer to say they 'followed their hearts' – either way, their intelligence, complimented perfectly by imagination, draws them from their homeland to the land of God's living promise. Because they have a larger, more fulsome view of the world which is neither limited by their knowledge nor crippled by their particular system of beliefs, they are celebrated as the first gentile worshippers of 'Emmanuel' - God-with-us.

¹in the multiple possibilities of meaning for that word – both fearsome and fabulous...

² **Epiphany:** 1) a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand, or suddenly become conscious of, something that is very important to you (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/epiphany>)

2) discovery - especially of a religious or spiritual nature; the sudden and unavoidable realization that something you first saw as ordinary, is anything but...

Herod, to his credit, does not dismiss the visitors as ‘crackpots’. He is spurred to action by the strange, heavenly news brought by the travellers. He consults the experts, and engages the assistance of these wise persons. Herod wants to know - Herod *needs* to know - what is happening in Bethlehem, but his are selfish reasons; he is willing to explore only a very narrow view of the possible. Herod is worried only about how his power/position will be affected. His only thought is to eliminate any potential competition. Epiphany creates anxiety and fear in him.

Our friends from the East – with strange gifts and stranger ways – have been moved to sacrificial travel by the light of a star and their openness to Divine possibility. They face Herod with what can only be described as dangerous naïveté. They arrive in Judah with no regard for what Herod may think of their visit - they conduct their search with only one thing in mind; they wish only to worship.

So what might Epiphany mean for us?

When we are confronted with the reality of God, or the (seemingly) outrageous claims of Scripture - when we are moved to consider the infant Jesus or the Risen Christ (or anything in between...) - are we threatened, or are we energized?

The faintest suggestion that God is more often present (and more deeply involved) in the work of the world can threaten our self-importance. While many claim to be ‘spiritual but not religious’, we are much more comfortable with religious trappings than we are with spiritual awakenings. The Spirit ‘blows where it will’ and those who are willing to be swept along with it (Noah, Moses, Abraham et. al) often find themselves speaking hard truth to those who hold tightly to power in the physical world. Epiphanies - of the sort that give us a glimpse of God’s good intention for us - are uncomfortable moments no matter who you are...but they can be wonderful too.

We inhabit a world that is meant to inspire awe and wonder in us. Our imaginations, though often weighed down with the work of being responsible adult members of society, are still a vital part of our humanity. The hunger that moves us to try new things (or the fear that keeps us from trying new things) are products of our imagination. The ‘spiritual-but-not-religious’ crowd are trying to say that their hunger for awe and wonder are not being satisfied by ‘religious institutions’ They (and I speak as one of them) are looking for experiences of Jesus; the infant, the teacher, the ‘rebel’, the Risen - All of us are eager for our Epiphany; that moment when the presence of God is undeniable; when the breath of God fills us; the grace of God finds us; those moments are constant - as much a part of the fabric of Creation as air, water, sand and stars - and we need not be afraid to search them out.

It can be as simple as asking the question of the *Magi*: “Where is He...?”

Waking up, into a new year full of promise, we can train ourselves to look for the signs; compassion, beauty, joy, peace, friendship - stirrings of the Spirit of Grace that show themselves in spite of the prevailing mood. Like a new star in the heavens, we should pay close attention to the good that blooms in the world and pursue it with wild abandon.

If we are willing - as those strangers from the east were willing - to seek wonder and glory as we journey in the world; if we choose to imagine that God waits for us in those wonderful, glorious moments - moments that dare us to believe - then we will certainly get more than we bargained for. Epiphanies are all around us. God is with us - the kingdom is near - the ancient and eternal promise of God will not be denied.