

“Prepare the Way: Find”
Isaiah 60.1-6, Matthew 2.1-12

Today we celebrate the “Epiphany of the Lord,” which officially transitions us from the Christmas Season and into what we in the church call “Ordinary Time;” the weeks between Epiphany and Transfiguration Sunday. Next week is Baptism of the Lord, followed, on January 20, by the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, and from then on the Sundays are all numbered until the week before Lent begins.

All this information *might* come in handy if you were ever chosen to participate on a game show, but what does it mean for us? Sometimes we do actually use “epiphany” in conversation outside a church setting—for example, when a new idea pops into my head, I might say I had an epiphany. We usually think of it as a fresh understanding of something we were confused about or ignorant of.

In ecclesiastical language, though, the word gets closer to its Greek meaning of “manifestation.” In general it means an appearance, or manifestation, of the divine, so today we celebrate the appearance—the manifestation—of Jesus, as the Messiah, to the visiting magi, and that is definitely reason for celebration!

In some cultures, in fact, Epiphany is a greater celebration than Christmas. The author of this month’s preaching notes writes: “Growing up in Puerto Rico and then serving for 25 years in parishes involving families from different Spanish-speaking countries, I found that these texts were often used as the framework for big congregational celebrations aimed at making children happy, *Dia de los Tres Santos Reyes* (Three Kings Day). This is still an extraordinary festivity in many U.S. communities. Many of these have been sponsored by social agencies, Catholic, protestant, or Pentecostal congregations.

[He goes on to say] My wife and I taught my own children to find a shoe box, fill it with grass, and place it under their beds on January 5 (the eve of Three Kings Day). It was like a second Christmas Day for them, but with a slight difference: It’s a special occasion that has not been extremely commercialized in the U.S. Among many families, it is an extra time for sharing gifts or the only time. In some places, the gifts are very humble; in other places, it’s a time for a family reunion, carol singing, or attending special church services. Many of the cultural Puerto Rican songs shared during this time highlight the three kings as saints, who also deserve our respect because of their love for Jesus.”¹

And another article I read pointed out that “In many parts of the world, Epiphany is a bigger holiday than Christmas, with rituals of gift giving tied to treasure-bearing wise men instead of a jolly fat man in a red suit. In some places, children leave shoes filled with hay outside their homes. The hay is for the camels of the wise men, who leave gifts for the children in the shoes as thanks before resuming their journey to Bethlehem.”²

¹ (Cotto 2018)

² (Taylor 2009)

It's interesting to discover how Christmas and Epiphany are observed in other cultures, and it points out that diversity only adds to the significance of the epiphany event for us. As I read and re-read the passage from Isaiah, and reviewed the story of the wise men, reflecting on the sermon title and theme of "Find," several key words surfaced.

"Star," of course, since it was a star that guided the magi to "find" the child, Jesus. "Light," because the star gave light and because Jesus was and is the light. Also "Praise," and "Gifts" were important words from the day's scripture. But what do all these words mean to us—and to our spiritual journey?

I kept going back to Isaiah's words: "Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the Lord's glory has shone upon you." Of course we see the wise men's finding of the Christ Child as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. When we hear the words about camels and gold and incense, our imaginations are immediately transported to the scene where three majestically robed men wearing fabulously ornate crowns bring luxuriously wrapped gifts to Jesus.

There's more to the story than gold and frankincense and myrrh, even though the gifts were (and are) significant. I love the words the New Revised Standard Version uses: "When [the wise men] had heard the King, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Think for a moment about the last time you were overwhelmed with joy.

The wise men's overwhelming joyful emotion is not the end of the story, though. "They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

Those would probably not be the first gifts we would think of today to give to honor someone. They were appropriate for the occasion and for the givers, and prophetic of the unfolding of Jesus' life, and unpacking their symbolism is for another sermon. The point for now is that gold and frankincense and myrrh are not appropriate gifts for *us* to bring Jesus; that got me to thinking about our sermon series "Prepare the Way," and the focus word for today, "Find." Now that we, along with the wise men, have found Jesus, what *are* the gifts we can bring to honor him?

We've spent the past few weeks preparing for Christmas; getting our homes ready for family celebrations, finishing our gift-wrapping, and preparing our hearts for the coming of the Baby Jesus. The thing about preparing for and finding Jesus, though, is that offering gifts at the manger in honor of Christ the King isn't the conclusion of the story. We continually honor Jesus with our lives. We honor the Baby Jesus by carrying out the mission the adult Jesus commissioned us for.

A star revealed the way for the wise men; Jesus lights *our* way. In my reading I discovered questions that forced me to dig deeper into the story of the wise men. Rev. Dr. Irving Cotto, of St. Paul's UMC in Warrington, PA, writes: "The Matthean text says, 'they set out; and

there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising until it stopped over the place where the child was' (v. 9). Where are those places where Jesus is and that we must stop? Under the bridges where the homeless live? At a hospice where someone is facing the very last hours of life? Among the hungry, the imprisoned? ... At every opportunity where people are longing for the light of Christ, the Christ of Epiphany is already there,"³ Cotto says.

As we look ahead to 2019, as we plan church activities and events, as we set goals and cast visions and dream of possibilities, we must look for the star, Jesus the Messiah, to guide us. Is the star leading us to something new, or has it stopped to highlight a project to be developed, or a relationship to foster? Let us be intentional, as we begin this new year together, about watching for the star, and about paying attention to where it is leading us. When we find the Christ Child there, may we be overwhelmed with joy, and honor him with the gift of our lives. Amen.

Works Cited

Irving Cotto, Sr. "Advent Christmas Epiphany 2018 19 Worship Planning Series." *Discipleship Ministries*. 11 2018. https://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kingera-files/worship/YearC_Advent18-Epiphany19-Master-Doc.pdf (accessed 11 2018).

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Feasting on the Word*. Edited by Barbara Brown Taylor David L. Bartlett. Vol. 1 Year C. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

³ (Cotto 2018)