

“EPIPHANY – WISDOM FOR A NEW YEAR”

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I have always liked these few Sundays after Christmas. They always seem less frenzied, quieter, with a gracious afterglow. The twelve days of Christmas ended yesterday, with the Festival of Epiphany. The season of Epiphany continues until Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. So I thought it would be good, this morning, to examine Epiphany more deeply and then finish with a few thoughts about seeking a little more wisdom in this new year 2018.

Epiphany is based on the tradition that sometime between the birth of Jesus and twelve days later, Magi, Wise Men from the East came, led by a star, and found Jesus the babe in an animal's feedbox. They worshiped him and gave him gifts and secretly left for their own country. And I know you know this part of nativity story because you acted it out in a pageant four Sundays ago.

The word Epiphany is Greek meaning manifestation, a deep illuminating insight, which often has a life changing effect. So what was the epiphany in Bethlehem? Let me suggest at least three special ways it has been understood.

First, that God was actually incarnated in this world, in the flesh, especially with this child Jesus, who would even be called the God-man by many. But also, and even more importantly, it revealed that this same universal God maybe found in the flesh of all persons, especially with those of goodwill.

Secondly, epiphany, this divine manifestation, also meant that if we are wanting to create a world of peace and good will, with justice and compassion, we must look not to God but to ourselves and attempt to live similarly by no less than the same humanitarian spirit and ethical behavior that motivated the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Thirdly, this epiphany also accents the revelation that this new baby is meant for all people on earth, no matter their nationality, culture, race, creed or sexual identity. The Magi, the Wise Men from the East, were not Jews, as Jesus was, but gentiles, foreigners, and here they are kneeling, and doing homage to this Jewish babe in Bethlehem.

That is quite a manifestation in and of itself. That God's love has no boundaries, and that no group can make special claims to being God's favorite, especially we might add, those who consider themselves Christian. That we are all chosen people,

birthed in the image of God, is an additional and joyful manifestation of Epiphany, and why we are wise to celebrate this universalism more fully.

I want to tell you more about the Magi, the Wise Men in this story, but let me share how one of the wisest men of our time, the Philosopher-Mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead, described this epiphany more broadly and more profoundly:

“The essence of Christianity is the appeal to the life of Christ as a revelation of the nature of God and of God’s agency in the world. The record is fragmentary, inconsistent, and uncertain.

But there can be no doubt as to what elements in the record have evoked a response from all that is best in human nature. The Mother, the Child, and the bare manger: the lowly man, homeless and self-forgetful, with his message of peace, love and sympathy: the suffering, the agony, the tender words as life ebbed, the final despair: and the whole with the authority of supreme victory.”

The life of Christ is not an exhibition of over-ruling power. Its power lies in its absence of force. It has the decisiveness of a supreme ideal, and that is why the history of the world divides at this point of time.”

And it has been an incredible history, effecting most all the lives of this world.

But this morning since Advent, Christmas, New Year, and Epiphany are all wrapped up with love and good cheer, a season for candle lighting and stargazing, I want to focus especially on the most popularized star gazers in all history – the Magi, the Wise Men themselves, who in their star gazing discovered a peculiar westward leading star which they decided to follow.

We urban dwellers are not great star gazers. At night we have too many other lights in the way, deluding the darkness of the sky and most of the gems in it. The stars have also lost their necessity as a map. Even the U.S. Navy has stopped teaching celestial navigation. Satellites and global positioning systems have replaced the Northern Star.

But this was not the case when Matthew wrote his story of Jesus’ birth. He tells of these Magi, astrological seers from the East, who had been touched by rumor or a dream that out of Israel would come a new world ruler, a benevolent king who would bring peace to this God forsaken world. This star seemed to be a sign of it, so in following it, they came to Bethlehem, and there they found an infant that they indeed

felt was the one who would lead the world to peace. And so, kneeling, they worshipped him and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Then, wisely afraid their presence might reveal Jesus' location to the Judean King Herod, they secretly left for their own country. And rightly so, because King Herod, a notorious serial killer, squashed all who were a threat to his throne – and for 36 years he was very successful at it.

Only Matthew tells this story. There is no other mention of the Magi anywhere else in the Bible. But it is a lovely story, and as it turns out, would be a long story, too.

As for the star, it has been described as a meteor, a comet, a nova, or perhaps a conjunction of planets. My astronomer friend, Dean Regas, the co-host of PBS' Star Gazers, tells me that the star could not have been a supernova or a comet because there was no record of either at that time. He adds, "While there are those who would justify the bright star as a conjunction of two planets which would appear as one star, the Magi of that day were smart enough to know the difference." Regas concludes, "The star remains a mystery – a UFO. And, Hal, he added, maybe it's better that way." Perhaps he is right.

Today we make a clear distinction between astrology and astronomy, but until the 17th century they were hardly differentiated. **Astronomy** is the scientific understanding of the physics of the universe, while **astrology** is a pseudo-science – a belief that the stars affect earthly events and our individual fate. The ancient creed of astronomy is, "As above, so below." The whole Zodiac charts are based on that premise. And so thought the Magi that came to Bethlehem.

The earliest Magi were also priests, but at the time of Matthew's story, the Magi were simply known as wise men, possessed of cosmic knowledge that foretold of both dangers and opportunities. They were often employed as consultants by those in power, fortune tellers, such as was employed and often in our own White House, especially during the Ronald Reagan's years.

Yes, astrology does persist today, and every day newspapers still print its findings for the many who still believe that the stars arrangement still determine our fate. "As above, so below."

Most theologians today understand that Matthew's Magi story, written some 70 years after the birth of Jesus, is largely mythological. It probably was Matthew's

own attempt to assure others that Jesus' birth, like the lives of all great persons of that era, was not happenstance, but had a more special, cosmic causation.

Today as to our human lot in life, we know luck happens to us all, and bad things happen to even good people, and most of us agree with Shakespeare's Cassius that any faults with our destiny "is not due to our stars but ourselves, we underlings!

However, the idea that there were Magi throughout the Mid-east looking for signs, seeking directions from the heavens, and following where they pointed to, is not a fiction. There were many.

But what is most fascinating about the Magi in our story is what happened to them after they leave Bethlehem. They take on a life of their own. Bear with me as I recount some of it.

First, we know that other than Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the Magi became the earliest and most popular icons in Christianity. The first century catacombs are filled with their pictures. The shepherds, who allegedly had first heard the angels' announcement of the birth of Jesus, were rarely described in iconic art until some 1400 hundred years later.

Secondly, there were early reports that the Wise Men, who continued to be a part of a secret Gnostic society, actually returned to the Holy Land to tutor the now teenaged Jesus with their esoteric knowledge.

Fairly soon in history, the Three Wise Men were understood to be really **three Kings**. This was probably due to an ancient biblical prophecy that even Kings would come and bring gifts to the future King of Israel because he was expected to be a just and compassionate King, and would have a deep regard for the poor.

In the course of time, the Magi were also given various names, depending on the country. In Europe by the 6th Century their names were **Balthazar, Melchior and Casper**, as we hear in the familiar carol.

Who they were and what they meant continued to evolve. In the Autun Cathedral in Burgundy, France, there is a stone mural of the three kings all lying together under a blanket in a huge bed. All wearing their crowns! An angel is awakening them and pointing to a star.

One king is wide awake in wonder.
One is half-awake.
And the third is sound asleep.

The painting is really a depiction of the three forms of spiritual alertness, and those who viewed the mural were meant to re-examine the quality of their own faith. Is your faith alive, half-baked, or without a clue?

But these three **magi**, or **astrologists**, or **priests**, or **wise-men**, or **kings**, were to evolve even more. By the 12th century they were seen as symbolic of the **three stages of life**, and were so depicted: one was young, one was middle aged, and the third resembled my age.

Years later, they were understood to represent the **three human races** and continents known at that time – yellow, black, and white faced, dressed in Oriental, African, and European dress. Today in China some still proudly claim one of the wise men as their very own. Generally, though, for a couple of reasons, most believe the Magi came from Persia, or Iran today.

We have a historical record that in the 7th Century (A. D.) the Persians conquered and destroyed Palestine. They burned Jerusalem and killed 60,000 of its inhabitants – mostly Christians. Their army then pushed on to Bethlehem, only five miles further. There they decided not to destroy city because in the Church of the Nativity, Jesus' alleged birthplace, they discovered on the mural walls the portraits of the Three Kings. They were clearly dressed in Persian clothing.

Also, in the 12th Century, when Marco Polo crossed Persia on his way to China, he records visiting the reported burial spot of the Magi and hearing of their many ancient exploits.

Today, if you want to visit the official Shrine of the Magi, you would go to Cologne, Germany where there they are beautifully entombed in the giant Cologne Cathedral. Emperor Frederick thought that by bringing the bones of the Wise Men to Cologne he was effectively bringing Bethlehem to Europe. This was important because pilgrimages to the Holy Land were no longer possible after it had fallen to the Muslims.

This period also marked a new role for the Three Wise or Kingly Men. The Diocese of Cologne had declared that the Magi actually had been consecrated as **Bishops** by

Jesus' disciple Thomas when he went through Persia on his way to India in the First Century.

Therefore, artists, from that point on, were a little confused as to what type of head gear to give the Magi – a Persian conical cap, or a kingly crown, or a bishop's miter. Artists preferred to portray them as Kings to remind their own rulers that they, too, must bow down to a higher authority, just as the Three Kings had knelt in Bethlehem.

Also, history differs as to how many Magi there were. They have been portrayed from two to a dozen. Historians settled on three because of the three gifts that were given.

And, of course, the gifts themselves have countless interpretations. **Gold** for wealth – and **frankincense**, generally used as an incense –and **myrrh**, a perfume. But the three gifts had other uses, as well.

One of the most down to earth explanations of these gifts came from St Bernard of the 12th Century:

Gold – Financial aid for this poor family.

Frankincense – To disinfect the stable.

Myrrh – An herbal remedy to prevent worms in children.

Well, there is no end to the Magi's story!

Recently, the Magi became the focus of a 20th Century opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which tells of the Three Kings stopping on the way to Bethlehem and befriending a lame boy and his gallant Mother. This opera has become the most seen opera in all history. It may be true that nothing is truly real until it becomes music.

But let me add an even more recent development to their legacy. A few years ago, my wife and I received a Christmas card from a wonderful lady, who is aged in years and wisdom and an outstanding feminist. Opening the envelope, we laughed because it was a picture of the three Magi and their gifts. They had elaborate crowns which went well with their makeup and beautiful dresses. Dresses! Yes, the Three Kings had now become the Three Queens! The Wise-men were now the Wise-women. Surely a most appropriate addition to the Magi tradition!

Betty and I were here at Harbor when you acted out the Nativity Story and clearly you had no problem casting two women in the Kingly role.

And how fitting, for we know that wisdom in the scriptures has a feminine gender – **Sophia**. Wisdom, that is, Sophia, is describe in the Bible as God’s first creative act long before Adam. We read in Proverbs that “**The Lord created me, Sophia, at the beginning of the creation, the first of God’s acts of old. They who find me find life...all who hate me love death.**” Prov. 8ff.

Yes, considering the Magi’s own evolution, it does seem fitting and good for the world, to encourage gifts of wisdom from all races, all continents, all religions, and all sexes in this world.

This leads us to ask how, in practical ways, we might become a little wiser as this new year unfolds? We might begin with the question that Job in the Bible asked of himself during in his difficult life, a life so terrible his wife suggests he curse God and die! Still Job asks:

“Whence then comes wisdom? And where is the place of understanding?”

Job would finally come to the conclusion that true wisdom was simply to live with a penetrating trust in God, and with courage strongly reject evil.

The great biblical prophets also summarized what is it to be wise. Their composite answer was, “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” All good recommendations.

I don’t think we will become a little wiser in this new year simply because we will grow a little older. The only thing that comes for sure with growing older is a loss of dexterity and physical stamina – let me tell you about my aches and pains!

No, wisdom can come at any age, from anyone, in any station in life. **Aging** can accumulate experiences, **education** can increase knowledge, but **wisdom** comes when we learn the art of reflection. It comes when we slow down and begin to see the value of the many sidedness of life and the rich complexities of being a person.

So I suggest this year we learn more about the rich complexities of being a person. One way, among many others, I would suggest is to read more biographies of people who tried in authentic ways to make this world into a more just and caring place, and learn from their struggles, their failures and successes.

Biographies of Schweitzer, Gandhi, King, Jefferson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Lincoln, Helen Keller and a host of others come to mind.

I just finished last week the new Biography of Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader who moved his totalitarian country into a democratic socialist society, while restoring religious freedom and individual rights of conscience for all, and he did it with resorting to force, to being a big bully, as some in high office often seem to be. And I also discovered a lot more about the worth of marital love, as was the case between he and wife Raisa, a marriage that we all could envy and hope to emulate.

Yes, values well lived are the fabric of wisdom. And values come through human understanding. The great virtues, namely prudence, temperance, courage, humility, tolerance, gentleness, fidelity, compassion - to name a few, do need to be practiced daily in this new year and be held in high esteem. Why? Simply because love itself, which is greater than all the virtues, is so often absent in this world.

I recall reading that the excellent actor Denzel Washington, was changed by reading Malcolm X's autobiography. He said it made him understand the meaning of Christianity more fully, in spite of the fact that he and Malcolm were not of the same faith.

Yes, it is also rewarding to read the biographies of those souls who don't look at life the way most do but are sincerely struggling with it. You must be aware that a host of books disclosing the author's atheism appeared this past few year. They too, can add to our understanding and perhaps make us a little wiser.

By the way, I just finished the best-selling book, *Origin*, by Dan Brown who authored, *The Da Vinci Code*. I suggest that it will help any who wish to stretch their mind as to the relationship between religion and science. A subject which we all need to approach with wisdom. Besides it is an enjoyable book.

I also gained much wisdom from the latest biography of Albert Einstein, a wise-man indeed! I still don't understand his math, but I was enriched by his entertaining and practical wisdom.

Einstein wrote, **"We cannot despair of humanity, since we ourselves are human beings."** We may hopefully remember that when we despair or when we get too cynical about the politics of our present government, which most in our country are deeply despaired of.

“Force,” he also wrote, **“always attracts people of low morality.”** Maybe I will think twice before I try to coerce or bully my way this new year, and, yes, the President of these United States might do the same.

But I also like what he wrote: **“If my theory of relativity is proven successful, Germany and France will declare that I am really a citizen of the world. Should my theory prove untrue, France will say that I am a German and Germans will declare I am a Jew!”**

Would that we could all be wise enough to laugh at ourselves a little more this year.

Did you know that Einstein, after becoming a US citizen, was asked to be the President of Israel? He turned the offer doDwn. He never let his citizenship in the several countries where he lived be his highest concern.

He wrote:

“Anyone who really wants to abolish war must resolutely declare himself in favor of his own country resigning a portion of its sovereignty in favor of international institutions. Nationalism is an infantile disease, the measles of mankind.”

And, yes, it is sad and unwise that our country, with its myopic policy, “America First” has pulled further away from the United Nations and other international treaties. Einstein is right to call “nationalism an infantile disease, the measles of mankind.”

Yes, it would be a good thing if we all became a little wiser this year. And we have a chance to improve, if we seek the place of understanding – discovering the truths that are incarnate in lived-well persons, goody and Godly souls. Einstein was such a gift. Although he didn’t hold to a personal God, he always denied atheism but not the atheist. And he would add, **“I am a Jew but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene.”** I am, too!

I believe it is a hopeful sign that a recent committee of seers, wise-men and women, have emerged which may brighten and broaden the world’s future. They are simply called “The Elders” - twelve persons of Nobel stature from every continent, such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter, Kofi Annan, Mary Robinson, and others. They share a global concern for justice and peace and are willing to go

beyond all boundaries to bring them into reality. A star-studded cast of wisdom indeed, and like the Magi of old, they are willing to travel across all borders.

William Sloane Coffin, former Chaplain at Yale and a wise religious voice whose death this past year many of us mourn, wrote,

“The challenge today (on this planet) is to seek a unity that celebrates diversity...to recognize the need for roots while insisting that the point of roots is to bring forth branches. Human beings are fully human only when they find the universal in the particular, when they recognize that all people have more in common than they have in conflict.”

I suggest that is the kind of spiritual cosmology our little planet needs. That is Epiphany’s meaning.

No, we don’t really know who Matthew’s Magi were, or anything definitive about that star. There are so many stars and planets. Perhaps, though, we can consider, in closing, the one that Robert Frost saw and mused over when he wrote:

**“O star (the fairest one in sight) ...
Not even stooping from its sphere
It asks a little of us here.**

**It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.”**

We might ask, what will do this for us that is something like a star? That will humble us when our pride has carried us too high, or will resurrect us when we have fallen so low? Something like a star that will keep us from being a part of the world’s unraveling? Something that will unite the particular with the universal into a peace; a harmony of harmonies; a more heavenly earth? Well it shone for me and countless others over Bethlehem and it has not gone out.

It is the star of justice and compassion. The J. C. Star. Let it shine and shine even more in this new year!