

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Epiphany, Sunday, January 4, 2015  
Matthew 2:1-12

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Today we celebrate Epiphany and its guiding story of wise men visiting the baby Jesus and his family in Bethlehem with 2 baptisms. Today we welcome Matthew and Isabella into the family of God as we mark the end of the Christmas season and begin a time of growth guided by God's revelation of God's own Son in the world. Jesus is born, God's light has come and now we need to learn to walk in that light anew, bringing Isabella and Matthew along with us. Their baptism and our whole Epiphany celebration today is an opportunity to consider where we have come from and where we are going.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, the story of Jesus' birth is told very differently than in the Gospel of Luke with its angels and shepherds and no room at the inn. Matthew's account begins with a genealogy tracing Jesus' lineage all the way back to Abraham in 3 neat sections of 14 generations each: "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob..." and so on and so on until: "... Jacob (a different Jacob) the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." This genealogy serves to clearly and undeniably place Jesus in the story of God and God's people Israel. It tells us where Jesus has come from. The importance of it is not unlike the continuing importance of history and ancestry for many. When we talked about bucket lists last week, for instance, a few people mentioned their desire to visit important places in their family history. The sense of groundedness and belonging that comes from knowing where we come from is a critical aspect of our identity. Part of the reason the baptisms we celebrate today mean more than simple family ritual is that in baptism, we ensure that these 2 babies belong as part of God's family forever. Whatever else they may choose through their life, Isabella and Matthew come from a family of faith and the church will always be their home.

Our Epiphany story today comes in the next chapter when, having established Jesus' place in continuity with Israelite and Jewish tradition, Matthew introduces something new: "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem..." The story turns from history and genealogy and identity, to contemporary times with talk of temporal kings and to a world beyond that of the Jewish community. The introduction of these wise men from the east shifts the story considerably with a shock that is hard to grasp in our place so far removed from the original context of the story. But clearly it's no longer in the realm of "where we have come from."

Matthew grounded his telling of Jesus' story in Jewish culture and community because that is the place from which salvation has always come. From the perspective of his early readers, that's the way it has always been. God's salvation for the world has always come through the nation of Israel living as a beacon of God's light and life. It is the people of Israel to whom God revealed Godself in the giving of Torah and in the promise of David's everlasting kingdom. God might care about Gentiles in a general way, but that doesn't change the locus of

salvation or the revelation of the same. And so the entry of outsiders - Gentiles - into the story is strange. More, as one commentator describes them, these strangers are “Gentiles in the extreme, characters who could not be more remote from the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem in heritage and worldview.” (NIB, 145) That they arrive in Jerusalem to ask: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” is just foolish. King Herod is the King of the Jews and so the coming of another king, child or not, was not welcome news. That these wise men from the east have seen something that the faithful people of Jerusalem have apparently missed, through the Gentile practice of astrology no less, is even more strange: “for [they] observed his star at its rising...” That these strangers respond to the message of the starry sky by journeying to a foreign place, to pay homage to a baby king whose own people don’t even know him yet and whose presence can only cause trouble, is almost offensive. It is no wonder that the reaction of the current King of the Jews, Herod, along with the people of Jerusalem, is fear. Fear is a very sensible reaction to such a strange, unexpected and threatening turn of events.

Just the beginning of this story tells us something important about God in the season of Epiphany that we begin today. It tells us something about where this story, and where we, are going. If Epiphany is about the revelation of God not only to the insiders of the already established community but to the wider world, that would be hard enough. But this story is so much more, and so much more challenging, than that. Our story of Epiphany today is not just that God is revealed to Gentiles - to outsiders and strangers - but that it is the outsiders and strangers who are ironically called “wise men,” who will actually see the sign of God’s coming first and lead the way. This is a turn of events that is as unexpected and threatening now as it was then. The wise men in our story used their great learning and their knowledge of the stars, to follow the light, and find God. The challenge of Epiphany is for us to look for signs of light in our own time... signs that we can follow to find God and the new revelation God has for us.

The challenge of Epiphany is to consider where we are going. If our story today is true, then the uncomfortable truth is that it will likely be in using foreign means and methods that we will find our way. Like the people of Jerusalem who didn’t notice or didn’t know the meaning of the stars, for us to find our way, we will need people who have different knowledge and experience than us, to show us the way to salvation. There is, for instance, a funny picture making its way around Facebook of a baby on a phone, [hand to head] “no grandma... I said double-click the internet explorer icon...” A more grown-up and churchy example might be a quote from academic and author Phyllis Tickle who once commented... “postmodern, post-Christian, post-Protestant, and post-denominational. What do all these posts mean? That we know where we have been but that we have no idea where we are going!”

The Good News is that we know where we have been, where we have come from, and with that faith and the strength of our identity, we can weave our ancient tradition, Anglican heritage and biblical faith together with contemporary reality, and find our way forward. And the good news is that God invites us on an exciting new journey, each year, as we seek God’s revelation in our lives once more. That’s what Matthew did in writing a Gospel that reached back to the Israelite ancestors and then reached out to a new group - the Gentiles, for inclusion into God’s story. The children we baptize today are a testament to that commitment and process. They are a sign of God’s blessing and as they grow, they may be among the ones to show us the way forward. Throughout this season of Epiphany, may we trust that God is revealed in all kinds of

ways to all kinds of people and through them, may God show us the way in signs of light. May we be willing to see anew and bold enough to follow.