

One slide only

Today we celebrate Epiphany. The exact day of Epiphany follows the twelve days of Christmas and is always January 6. I know it is only January 5th but since this is the year of Matthew in the lectionary I thought we should take advantage of the story. On December 22 we heard the account of the birth of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1, last Sunday we heard the story of the death of the innocent children in Matthew chapter two, and this week we hear of visitors from the East guided to Jesus by a star, the Epiphany story in Matthew chapter two. For many weeks to come we will be reading through the early chapters in the gospel of Matthew.

There are many scholarly debates in Matthew chapter 2 about the scientific possibilities of an actual star which guided the visitors from the East. Then there are the arguments concerning last week's story over whether or not young children were actually killed by the order of raging King Herod. Some say those who were killed could have included earthly cousins of Jesus. Whether these events actually happened and can be proved do not matter for us to see something of what the author wants us to understand about Jesus and the kingdom of God which is breaking in.

Like I said last week, it is true in our world that children and the vulnerable suffer because of the unjust use of power by tyrannical rulers. But violence does not have the final word. Time is being shaped by the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus. When we can see that and know that we will live in a different manner.

In our story for this week, the star may help us to have something new about God revealed to us. We have a need for divine revelation to enable us to see the Messiah and the King. Without the star, we would miss the Messiah. In our gospel story we see the star guiding the visitors from the East to the Christ Child. Without the star, these travelers would not have found their way. We know little of their motives or reasons for traveling, only that they were compelled to follow the star.

Stars continue to intrigue the human mind. "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight." I used to see many more stars when I was growing up. On the farm we could go out at night, lie down in the grass and take in the twinkling lights of the night. Riding home in the family car, we would stare out the windows and hope to see a shooting star or northern lights. The night sky was filled with wonders and constellations.

Several years ago I had the privilege twice to take each of our sons out into the countryside away from village lights so that they could stare into the great night sky. The science unit assignment was for them to notice stars in a range of colors and to map out the location of the stars. I learned as I listened to the boys that the range of colors of stars indicates their temperature, composition, and distance from the earth. Going from cool to hot, we searched the skies for red, orange, yellow, green, white and blue stars. As I assisted them I understood that there is always something to learn about life. There is always something to wonder about.

The presence of the star in our story acts as a sign of the new time now ordered in the manner of the Messiah. The star acts as a guide leading visitors to the new king. The presence of the star creates wonder in the hearts of those who follow it, preparing them to see what God would reveal. In the story in the gospel of Matthew, the revelation is of the divine one, Emmanuel, God with us. In order to discover the real meaning of the Christmas story, we must "follow the star."

The visitors from the East followed the star and traveled until they arrived at Jerusalem, perhaps assuming that the new king would be a resident in a place where position and power resided. They went to the local ruler Herod to inquire about the newborn king's whereabouts. Unfortunately, the encounter with the visitors from the East threw Herod into confusion. He became frightened that he would lose his place of wealth, power, and glory. Those who had aligned themselves closely to Herod feared losing the benefits of being a friend to the ruler, even if he was a tyrant. They, too, were thrown into uncertainty. With him, at least they were not at the bottom.

Herod did all he could to find out about this child who was destined to be king. He ended up being helpful in pointing the visitors in the right direction so that they might find the goal of their journey. Herod hoped these visitors would repay him by reporting to him the exact location of the child.

Herod's advice was that they should go to Bethlehem. When the visitors from the East resumed their travels they noticed the star was again there to guide them. The star went ahead of them and stopped over the place the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. They were filled with joy with excitement and anticipation that they had arrived at the goal of their journey. They were about to see the one born king of the Jews. But then something else occurred.

When they came into the presence of Jesus, they were humbled, and they knelt down and worshiped him. They had cared for their extravagant gifts the whole long journey, but it is striking that the first thing they do is worship Jesus, not present their gifts. To be in the presence of Jesus and acknowledge that he is God leads one to worship the one true God. God had revealed Godself in Jesus. The visitors from the East learned that their travels did not simply lead them to an individual of import, but to the beginning of faith, the transformation of their hearts, and a following beyond a star.

Epiphanies are life-changing realizations which change the rest of the story. The visitors from the East were surprised but what happened to them at the goal of their journey.

Today, to encourage you to search for God in daily life, I invite you to take a star word home with you. Your assignment, if you will, is to take the word and reflect on it over the next weeks and perhaps as long as a year. There is nothing magical about each word. The invitation is to enter into a journey like the visitors from the East, and discover how reflection on a word might shape your life, or help you to see God in a new way. For example, if you take the star with the word "caring" on it, you might search stories in scripture for examples on how God is caring, then wonder about how you practice being caring, and see where that takes you. There are several baskets going around and they will end up in the gathering area after worship if you wish to look for a word following worship.

The visitors from the East in our gospel story were guided by a star until they came into Jesus' presence. Then their hearts were changed. The power of the revelation of God was now inside them. As they left Jesus to return to their homes, they no longer saw a star in the sky to guide them. The star of their life had become Jesus. Their life is now joined to Jesus' life. They begin a new journey of participation in the manner and the way of Jesus. It is an alternative world in contrast to the manner and way of Herod. They do not return to Herod's violent and fearful rule, they now walk in the way of Jesus.