Jim's Sermon – Epiphany - Sunday December 30, 2023

Today we celebrate the feast of the epiphany. The word epiphany means literally to shine forth, it also means a moment of awareness or an encounter with the truth. It is on this day that we particularly acknowledge and honour Jesus as the Christ, the son of God. For the eastern churches epiphany is marked by a celebration of the baptism of Jesus. In the west we commemorate epiphany with the story of the Wise Men.

Who were these mysterious travelers from the East? What role did they have in the story of Christmas, and what does their story have to say to us right now? Matthew is the only evangelist that makes any mention of them, and what information he does give us is pretty thin. He says only they were wise men from the east who came looking for a child who was born king of the Jews. Some scholars believe these were Zoroastrian priests from Persia, and thus we have come to sometimes refer to them as the Magi, which is the title given to priests in the Zoroastrian religion.

Over the centuries this little story has been surrounded by various legends: there were three, they were kings, their names were Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar, etc. But in regard to the identity of the wise men we are left mostly with questions. The really interesting question is why are they here, at the heart of the Christmas story? What was the theological reason for Matthew giving the wise men such a prominent place?

One reason is to show that the birth of Jesus as humble as it was, was a cosmic event, an event that would change the world forever, an event that effected the very stars of the heavens. The wise men were not Jewish, there is no indication that they were in any way familiar with the Jewish scriptures, but they were people who paid attention to the heavens. They noticed the arrival of a dramatic new star. And somehow, they determined it's meaning. They were opened to other cultures, other peoples, and they were opened to the miraculous.

The presence of the wise men show that the birth of the Christ child was not an event that was for the chosen people alone, that Christ had come not just for the Jews, though this was clearly the Jewish Messiah foretold by the prophets. The wise men were there to show that Christ had come for all humanity. This would of course be important to the early church as it found new adherents among the non-Jewish gentiles across Asia minor and as far away as Rome itself.
The wise men also fulfilled some of the details of the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah. Specifically, the one which reads:

"Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . . A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."

The wise men fulfilled this prophecy for Matthew and maintained a consistency with the Hebrew prophets.

So the story of the wise men served to show both that Jesus was the messiah foretold by the Jewish prophets, but was not for the Jews alone.

Finally, the wise men provided a contrast to Herod. Herod was the King of Palestine. He was a non-Jew who had been put in power by the Romans. His response to the birth of Jesus was panic and fear. He was afraid of anyone that might threaten his power. He attempts to use the wise men to find Jesus so that he can have him killed. The wise men on the other hand, also sometimes believed to be kings, respond quite differently to the birth of Jesus making a long and dangerous journey, just to have a chance to worship him. Two very different responses.

Gregory the Great once said that the wise men came out of curiosity to see Jesus, but they returned home on a different road. When we encounter Jesus through prayer through worship through open and curious hearts, the change that happens within us, over time is the very change that Jesus sought to bring. The mission of Jesus was/is to change hearts. The way is also the result. We cannot encounter

Jesus by staying in our ego oriented, fear-based thinking. We must strike out in our minds and hearts into new territory, and when we find the Christ child, we cannot go back to the way we were. The world will have changed for us, and that is what epiphanies are all about.