

**A NEW DAWN:
By Another Road**

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
January 3, 2010 ♦ EPIPHANY SUNDAY
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they 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. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

***"And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
[the wise men] left for their own country by another road."***

Matthew 2:12

We have now moved beyond the rush of Christmas and New Year festivities. We have reached the shining time of Epiphany. Thank God for Epiphany! It comes upon us with such gentle radiance.

Epiphany is a feast of light. It is a season when we ponder the Christ-light and look for all the ways this light keeps on showing up in our lives. Epiphany is a quiet time – fleshed out in winter's bleakness – that gives us an opportunity for the Christmas revelation to sink in, to let the light find its way into all the corners of our life. As Peter Gomes warns: "To leave the story of Jesus in the manger, to pack it up as we have done with our crèche and put it away for another year, is to fail to understand what the Epiphany is all about." Or, as Howard Thurman suggests: "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins..." Epiphany is the time we begin *that* work!

Technically, Epiphany begins immediately after the 12 days of Christmas, or always on January 6th. But since most of us in are so wiped out after Christmas Day and all that leads up to it, and since we have lost any concept that Christmas could be a twelve day celebration and not a one day event, and since even trying to get a number of us to gather for another "Feast" this coming Wednesday night, I decided that we would just go ahead and celebrate Epiphany today. And like Christmas, Epiphany is also more than a day. It is also a season that begins on January 6 and lasts until the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday, which this year is February 17.

Epiphany offers us a time to be alert to revelations that surprise us like little shimmers of light showing up at odd, needed times.

Epiphany points to the story of the Wise Men, who saw a star that compelled them to follow that light to a barn in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. The Epiphany story of the wise men ranks right up there with the Christmas and Easter stories in terms of snaring the human imagination.

Epiphany is the season to be aware of the Light – and all the ways that Light spills over us.

Epiphanies are revelations, moments of insight and discovery, “a-ha” moments that break in on us and change us forever. As Christians, we see Jesus as our light and we are still trying to walk in that light and discover more about that still shining light as we go.

So much has been made of this story about which we know so little. The Wise Men were not kings of course, and there were not three of them, at least not according to Matthew, who we learned from our children in their Christmas pageant, was the only gospel writer to speak of the wise men. We do not know who they were, where they came from, or how many of them there were. We do not know how long it took them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was by the time they got there. We are not even sure about the famous star.

It is not that the facts don't matter. It is just that they don't matter as much as the stories do, and we know stories can be true whether they happen or not. You do not have to do archaeology to find out if they are genuine. You do not have to spend years in the library combing ancient texts in order to prove their truthfulness. You just listen to the story. You listen to the story and let it come to life inside of you, and then you decide on the basis of your own tears or laughter whether the story is true or not.

This is the story that came to mind after I read a book this past fall by Phyllis Tickle, entitled *THE GREAT EMERGENCE: HOW CHRISTIANITY IS CHANGING AND WHY*. In that book she puts the current state of the Church in some interesting and helpful perspective. She notes that every 500 years the Church feels compelled to clean out its attic and hold a giant rummage sale. Every 500 years or so, the old ways of being Church no longer work nor have meaning, and something new, *A NEW DAWN*, emerges. In other words, a number of times in our two thousand year history, the Church has decidedly gone home by another road.

And this going home by another road was not just an isolated event with some wise men surrounding the birth of Jesus but is a recurring cycle of spiritual growth and enlightenment. As Tickle notes, if we go back 500 years, we have the Great Reformation, when protestant Christianity split off from Roman Catholicism. If we go back 500 year before that, we have the Great Schism, when the Western, Roman Catholic Church separated from the Eastern Orthodox Church. If we go back 500 years before that we, we have Gregory the Great, who almost single handedly brought organizational and political coherence to the Church, largely building on the work of St. Benedict, that would guide it for the next five hundred years after the collapse of the Roman Empire. If we go back 500 years before that we get the birth of Jesus and the faith of Christianity that was built on his vision of God's kingdom, a vision that eventually led to the separation of Christianity from Judaism. And because time is short, suffice it to say that this pattern of 500 year rummage sales is also noticed in Judaism' and Islam's history as well. For instance, rabbi's will note that 500 years before Jesus' birth, the Jews experienced the great exile, their Babylonian captivity.

The point Phyllis Tickle wants to drive home is that it seems we find ourselves *NOW* in a time that is living into a new 500 year shift...and a new attic cleaning, and its requisite rummage sale is well under way. All of this helps me to understand and to give meaning to where we are on the Christian journey and where our congregation is at this time in history. What we are seeing is nothing new and there is nothing to fear except fear itself.

Yes, change is happening and that is never easy or always comfortable. Yes, you will have to pay attention and learn to practice the art of spiritual discernment. But I am confident that the

Christian Church will survive this cleaning of the attic, and this lightening of the load will do us some good!

My partner, Dan, is the pack rat of our family, but it always seems to fall to me to be the one who has to clean out the drawers, closets and garage of all that “packed” stuff. And when all of that purging and cleaning out is done, it feels so good. I think even the pack rat himself would agree that it feels good to lighten the load, to get rid of excess baggage, to let go of stuff of that is no longer useful or necessary.

Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ, seems to me to be among the growing number of congregations who are already living into these changes that are coming with great courage and grace, and with a great openness to where the Spirit might be leading. Quite frankly, I can't think of place I'd rather be than at this time and place in our history. There just seems to be more energy, more vitality, more excitement, more God, when you live on the edge, charting unknown territory. For wise women and wise men, Epiphany time is full of surprises, surprises that often send us down a new path, and home by another way.

When Herod, the local king, heard that the wise men were headed for Bethlehem, bringing gifts for the baby Jesus, he was threatened. What threat is a baby? But Herod was terribly suspicious of competition and stingy of power. So he sent word for the Wise Men to come tell him where the baby was, so that he could go and worship him too. But we know he didn't really want to worship him, but to get rid of him. So the Wise Men surprised King Herod instead and returned to their country “by another road.”

And this sense of “threat” is so real and so raw in the Church these days. Fundamentalism and all movements of doctrinal purity and conserving of tradition are all about fighting those “threats.” In fact, it shouldn't really surprise us that the conservative wing of the church has been so loud and so organized, both politically and religiously, these past few decades. And nowhere is this sense of “threat” more evident than in the debate about gay marriage. You hear it said all the time, gay marriage “threatens” the family and traditional marriage. Did you know that every single Roman Catholic Diocese in Ohio gave money to the campaign to overturn gay marriage in the recent Maine election? But they weren't the only Christians out there responding to their sense of threat!

We also see “threat” in the formation of the Creation Museum down the road and across the river from Cincinnati. Believe it or not, some Christians are still threatened by Charles Darwin, and science, and are hellbent on defending the literalness and factuality of the Bible, as if the Bible needs defended.

We also see it the angst of local Evangelical Lutheran Church of America congregations where many congregants are all in a tizzy these days about their national assembly's move to more inclusion and acceptance of gay and lesbian people last summer. And some of these folks are demanding a strong counter attack, others are leaving the ELCA altogether over this perceived and shocking “threat” to Christian decency and good order.

The way I see it, all of these responses are just the last gasps of a Christianity that is dying while a new Christianity is being born...a new Christianity that is finding its way home by another way.

The fascinating thing about the Wise Men is that they were curious enough to go find out about this baby. They were curious enough to follow a star. And they were shrewd enough to go home, not through Herod's palace, or even the seat of religious authority in the Temple, but “by another road.”

The Epiphany story is full surprises and the story seems to be preparing us to be open to surprises as well – epiphanies, revelations, all the little ways that God's light reaches us through ordinary events.

And this Light travels. It leaps over boundaries and takes us to new places, as Matthew tells it.

Every moment of our lives provides us with potential opportunities for Epiphany light to break through, for God's call to be heard. When Epiphany light gets on our faces and in our lives, then surprising things start happening. We start seeing with new eyes. We start finding that God can accomplish amazing things with ordinary people. We start seeing human needs; and instead of ignoring them, we say, "What can I, what can we, do to make a difference here?" We start seeing people in a new way. We start seeing light in the faces of the least likely of folks.

Mary Oliver offers us some insight into this Epiphany experience. In a jarring poem called "What I Have Learned So Far" she says:"

*Meditation is old and honorable, so why should I
not sit, every morning of my life, on the hillside,
looking into the shining world? Because, properly
attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion.
Can one be passionate about the just, the
ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit
to no labor in its cause? I don't think so.*

*All summations have a beginning, all effect has a
story, all kindness begins with the sown seed.
Thought buds toward radiance. The gospel of
light is the crossroads of -- indolence, or action.*

Be ignited, or be gone.

Be ignited or be gone. That seems to be where we are in the Church now (and always!). That is where we always are on our Christian journey of faith. And if you want our Christian faith to have any meaning or any importance to our lives, then this wisdom holds true: be ignited by this Christ-light, or be gone. BE IGNITED OR BE GONE!

I've heard that at some monasteries, the monks bow to each other. As they approach the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, the monks bow to their presiding priest just before they bow before the Eucharist to receive the bread and the cup. They do this to reverence the Christ in each other as well as in the Eucharist's bread and the wine.

So, as we gather at the Table this Epiphany, let us look for the Christ in each other. Let us look for the Light already shining among us. And when that Light shines, when the revelation breaks, when the "aha" surprises, let us leave our staid and stale routines and move toward the light.

One thing is for certain, when we find the light and let that light shine on us, we will have to return home by another road.