

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Epiphany Sunday

January 6, 2019

Scripture

Matthew 2: 1-23

Get Up and Go - #morelife

This Sunday is Epiphany, which means "showing forth." Historically, Epiphany has included the celebration of three things, all of which are considered key moments - key "firsts," we might say - in which Jesus' true identity shows forth: the visit of the Magi (this week's reading from Matthew); Jesus' baptism; and Jesus' first canonical miracle of turning water into wine during the Wedding at Cana.

A major theme of this part of the story is that God's salvation extends beyond Jesus' immediate Jewish community to include the Gentiles as well (in other words, to everyone). The visit of the Magi foreshadows this broad message of inclusion, and together with the great commission in Matthew 28:16-20, it frames the story of Jesus' life. Within these two bookends, Matthew's message is clear: not only supposed insiders, but also supposed outsiders are within the great circle of divine love. That is a message that many seem to miss along the way. Jesus' very birth with his first visitors is all about inclusion.

Despite the well-known carol, in Matthew's story of the Magi there are only two kings: King Herod and Jesus, the rumored "king of the Jews." The Magi are not kings but rather "wise ones," scholars who study the stars for signs and omens. So they aren't "kings" - and they aren't necessarily "three" either. The story mentions three gifts, but doesn't specify the number of people who carry them. Those gifts themselves are telling, however: gold for a great king, frankincense for a great priest, and myrrh for one who will suffer and die (in Mark, for instance, Jesus is given wine mixed with myrrh at the crucifixion (Mark 15:23); and in John, Nicodemus and Joseph wrap Jesus' dead body in myrrh and aloes (John 19:39)). The cross is foreshadowed in this story in at least three ways: in the myrrh; in the fact that not only King Herod but "all Jerusalem" are frightened at the Magi's news of the child's birth; and in Herod's murderous plot, masked as adoration.

The story of Jesus, from its very inception, is a story of unlikely characters. Old people, virgins, carpenters, shepherds. Now enter magi—who come from a different place, culture and religious practices—intersect with the story and become messengers that spreads the birth of a "King" to the "powers that be." The problem is there can only be one King and certainly Herod would not be passing the throne on to some poor random Jewish boy.

This news of the birth of a King thus send Herod into a panic, fearing the uprising of the occupied Jews. So Herod calls for a genocide, the ultimate oppression of any human race. So the angels continue to appear but this time the angel issues a "wake-up call" to Joseph and tells him to flee.

The angel role here is as one who issues a “wake-up call” to Joseph to flee. They become refugees on the move to save their lives. The message is clear—it is time to act. “Get up” is a word Joseph needs to hear in order to protect his family. This time there is no question, he recognizes the call of God and he does what is necessary.

Although many Christmas cards feature a bright star hovering over the holy family, scripture suggests only the Magi notice the star among the thousands of others visible on a clear night, and King Herod’s dependence on the visitors to lead him to the child indicates that neither he nor his assassins could follow the star without help.

I get this. Matthew’s theme here is the hiddenness of Christ, the small and often unnoticed ways God enters our lives in epiphanies large and small. This hiddenness is a kind of divine signature: instead of “showing forth” conspicuously at the Temple, God slips into the world by way of a poor family in a backwater town. And instead of “showing forth” to a crowd of supposed insiders, God will be noticed first by strangers from a foreign land, “wise ones from the East.” God does indeed show forth - but in a hidden way.

I don’t know about you but I often learn from children and people who don’t fit into the same mould as I do. Epiphanies rarely come from expected places. If they did they likely wouldn’t surprise us in the same ways. That was one of the best learning from my course work last year. We went and visited two churches in buildings and about 20 other places that were filled with mission, God’s love and grace. Peoples homes, shelters, housing projects, community gardens, recreation centres, day cares and more. Those were the places that opened my eyes to where God was at work.

This is the perfect opening for a new year. Open your year by reflecting on epiphanies both great and small. How has God shown up in your life or the life of others in ways you may have overlooked. As you reflect on your year, on encounters and experiences you had where were you holy experiences, revelations, moments? Where did messenger angels show up that you might not have acknowledged?

What are the marks, the signatures of divine presence? Wonders sometimes subtle, sometime hidden, often unnoticed. And what are the modes of attention that may help our eyes to see? Now that we have spent a month learning there are angels among us it is time to take notice of them in our lives. It is time to take notice of where we are being called to go forth and be angels in the midst.

Perhaps First, it will take careful, patient study and contemplation of small wonders, like the Magi studying their charts. And second, openness to following Jesus on his pathway of humility and grace, walking with supposed outsiders and questionable characters (like us!).

This might also be a great week for reflecting on how we as church and individuals should conceive and relate to people from outside our walls, from other religious traditions, or from no religion at all. Here at the very heart of the Christmas narrative, and at the outset of a new year, is a story that emphasizes how God’s love and “showing forth” extend beyond conventionally understood religious boundaries. God comes to an ordinary, humble family - and is recognized by wise ones from afar, alleged outsiders who can and do help show us the way!

Perhaps that is the question that follows us this season is what must we do to protect life and the most at-risk people in our day who are being threatened and oppressed? We have to be awake—to

shake off apathy, to awaken from our sleep, to “get up” and act. As we face a new year and have trained our ears to hear God’s call in the world, we must commit to make the journey, letting go of what we don’t need so that we can continue to embody the messages of hope, peace, joy and love and full life for all people.