Epiphany Sermon notes \* (These notes are for the purpose of my speaking and not written in complete sentences, for the full sermon watch on YouTube.)

At my house the tree still up. Yours? Is Christmas over? ☹not to miss my opportunity given by Church calendar, to give us 1 more week. Marking the end of the season on Jan 6- Epiphany

12 days b/w Dec 25th and Jan 6th. (12 days of Xmas – ending in Epiphany)

Epiphany – term commonly only used when you “have an epiphany” = an illuminating discovery or realization

church =word literately means “manifestation” -as in the appearance or embodiment of the divine/Jesus to the Gentiles.

The word does not appear in the bible, but has been celebrated in Rome since 4th C, and celebrated by Christians since the end of the 2nd C -even before Xmas was a holiday!

It marks the first two events in which Christ’s divinity is manifested -the pilgrimage of the magi, and Jesus’ baptism. (traditions like RC and Prod- focus on magi, E Orthodox focus on baptism)

Still celebrated today (see slides)

Why is Epiphany such a big deal?? – It highlights that someone else has noticed Jesus’ divinity -the magi (first outsider/gentile) / and John the Baptist (1st public declaration)

* I will stick with the story of the magi
* magi are another one of the unlikely characters in this whole xmas story.

These magi, these men from the East,

* who didn’t appear alongside the shepherds but more likely a year later. (since Herod’s death sentence came for any boys under 2)
* were not kings but astrologers
* not necessarily 3 of them, (3 gifts; 400 CE: 3 names + nationalities given to them), more likely a large entourage.
* It was customary to send a delegate to honor a new ruler in a neighbouring regime, so it is possible these stargazing astrologers could be court officials too.

Magi saw the star over Judea, so went to ask the king of the Jews (Herod), who was half Jewish, was both feared and hated by the Jews. They asked Herod: “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star rising and have come to worship him.”

* It is Herod’s fear that motivates him to ask his scribes/officials to check the scriptures as to where this king will come from -Bethlehem.
* Herod sends the magi to Bethlehem, and once again they see the star leading them to Jesus’ location.

For us, who have heard this story so many times, these 3 kingly figures are just another character in the nativity set, and it is easy to miss what these magi represent.

Because if you think about it, these foreign magi, were in most respects the “wrong” people to be doing what they did.

* these were foreigners, were not Jewish scholars who had studied the prophets of old, -they were pagans of different Eastern religions.
* Did they know of Balaam’s prophecy (Numbers 24:17) that “a star shall come out of Jacob”
* How did they know the star signified the birth of a Jewish king?

And yet, they embarked on a long journey with expensive gifts, eager to pay their homage. Their efforts led them to an encounter far beyond their expectations.

The King of the Jews before whom they knelt was not just another human king of a human kingdom, but the Son of the Most High God. The text says that “they were overwhelmed with joy” (2:10), which is an understatement. The wording in the Greek is emphatically redundant: “They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” (super excited, totally stoked)

Their homage was elevated into worship. The star and the dream (a dream in which a God they had not followed previous to this trip, visits them and tells them not to return to Herod) assured them that their pursuit had led them to the truth.

This star manifests, or appears, or shows up – all coming from the root of the word epiphany. This ‘showing up’ of the star is what led these foreigners to declare this baby a divine king.

Since the magi were gentiles, the festival of Epiphany commemorates the manifestation of the Messiah not only to Israel but to the world. And this is why this holiday was picked up even before the celebration of Jesus’ birth. These magi, were the first gentiles/outsides of the Jewish story- who picked up on Jesus’ divinity, and returned home to proclaim the good news.

I wonder though, went they got to Herod, who hadn’t heard of this new baby king, if that fact made them suspicious or at least quite curious of who this non-royal king was.

And then when they got to this small peasant home of a young carpenter and his wife, in the unremarkable village of Bethlehem, did they wonder (even just for a minute) if they had got the signs wrong. This baby was a nobody!

And here they had come all this way, with these expensive gifts, for a poor little carpenter’s son.

And the gifts they brought, items fit for a king, would have looked mighty out of place next to Mary’s collection of clay pots and household items on her shelf.

I thought about these gifts this week, and was struck by their double meanings. I have always heard about the symbolic uses for the gifts of frankincense and myrrh, the foreshadowing they provide for the way that Jesus will die later.

* Myrrh (oil) was used for anointing of kings, as well as an embalming oil (two things to foreshadow his death and life as the king.)
* Frankincense used as an incense as a symbol of a divine deity and wisdom

But there are other uses for these items that Mary would have been aware of.

* Myrrh was a commonly known pain reliever, healed wounds (possibly like from childbirth), was anti-inflammatory, and can also be used to treat diaper rash.
* Frankincense when burned as an incense is absorbed through the air, and it strengthens immune systems and facilitates postpartum physiology (like a baby’s breathing and digestion)
* all of a sudden, these gifts seem not only symbolic but entirely practical to a new mother.

And the gold, valuable today as it was then, practical for the traveling to Egypt and life they would have to live there for the next few years.

I wonder what this visit would have looked like, how they rich men and their entourage would have even fit into Mary and Joseph’s tiny house? And what Mary and Joseph thought about these foreigners traveling so far, just to find their little boy Jesus? Would they have spoken the same dialect? Would Mary have cooked her simple food for all these people? What did the neighbours think?

This foreign visit must have caused a stir in the neighbourhood. Yet, after the young, smelly, teenage shepherd boys on the night of Jesus’ birth, the next to recognize Jesus’ divinity are these foreigners from other lands and other religions that recognize God in human form.

What an odd assortment of characters at this nativity scene!

I find it beautiful, and also hopeful.

Hopeful in that God’s great story of good news is not just a story of insiders, and faithful, educated church go-ers, but includes the nobodies, like the shepherds, and the gentile foreigners magi, to notice Jesus’ divinity and interrupt their regular lives to come and worship this baby king of peasant parents.

This same sense of hope is found in the Isaiah text (Is 60:1-6).

* Isaiah is writing to a people who have been defeated and forced out of their home land, a people in exile.
* He tells them of a future time of peace, an end to war and forced migration, an end to their poverty, suffering and hunger. A new dawn when they will come together, fortune returning from far away lands, when their hearts will thrill and rejoice, and abundance and wealth come on the backs of camels, and all shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

It speaks to a hope that reminds us that no matter how dark, how desolate our personal and collective lives may have become, once more, light will break into the dark and we are encouraged to “rise and shine”

“*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” v.1*

The previous chapters of Isaiah details all the ways that the Israelites have failed to follow God’s ways -full of doom and gloom, but then God’s response to the people’s crooked ways and sense of despair, is not punishment, but an invitation to notice God’s glory. We are to follow God’s justice seeking ways not out of fear of punishment but as a response to God presence always with us, as a response of thanksgiving.

If you look closely at Is. 60, you may notice that the poem reverses the movement that we have come to expect of witness and mission. Here the nations will come to God’s people and discover the light.

The same thing is happening in the story of the magi -the foreign nations come to God’s people and discover the light/divine.

We are used to hearing sermons that exhort the congregation to take their light out to the world. We somethings get it in our heads that God only work through us in the church when we go out from here.

But here these two scriptures remind us that God is at work already outside of the chosen people, outside of the holders of scripture and faith, outside of the church. God is already at work out there.

And this gives me great hope. I am encouraged and challenged to arise and see the manifestation of the divine, to look out at the world and see where God has already been at work, to witness what unlikely characters God is already using to proclaim the good news.

I am encouraged and challenged to both notice and then to join in. Join in to what God is already at work doing in the world.

While that is a lovely thing for me to say -join in to what God is already doing in the world. how do you do that?

Many of us aren’t in the practice of looking, since often this requires us to stop, slow down, meditate and pray. (hard to schedule into our allotted time frames)

So, I’m giving you a tool: Star Words

* a practice in some other churches
* a randomly given word to guide you in meditation and prayer
* Just like the magi followed a star, which lead them to Jesus, I will give you a star, that through meditation and the HS can lead us closer to Jesus as well.
* We trust that God speaks to us in many ways, so here is a practice tool to help us to look at God in our midst, to change our perspective or focus our attention amid all the distractions of daily life.
* In prayer I often struggle to balance my speaking and listening (heavy on speaking, low on listening)
* Star words give us an opportunity to listen deeply and here God in a new way.

*(Ushers will hand out star words during song. online: email/mailbox)*

-Some churches use these words for the year. encourage you to use them for the season of epiphany. This season of following the star, a season where we can be led by the Holy Spirit to find the divine, if we are willing to follow the star and recognize the divine.

--

*Guiding God, so long ago you guided these magi on a long journey, and what they found was your divine Son. They found wisdom incarnate, a treasure more precious than the expensive gifts they brought. And they knelt and worshipped you. We praise and adore you as well, and acknowledge that you are worthy of everything we have and are. We are ever grateful that you used these gentile magi to expand the invitation to worship you. You continue to surprise us by working outside the boundaries we like to put you in. We ask that you guide us this season to see where you are already working in our world, our community, our life. Bless the practice of these Star Words, as a practice of listening and drawing near to your guiding spirit. In your name we pray, Amen.*