

“Following The Star of Wonder”

Matthew 2:1-12

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While many of us spent time this weekend packing up Christmas ornaments and taking down strings of lights for another year, in Ethiopia, they are still preparing to celebrate Christmas. Today is Christmas Eve and this evening, which for Ethiopia is *right now* due to the time difference, families are preparing big dinners before going to Church for the whole night. Tomorrow morning, children will wake up and open presents. The dates are different, and the traditions are similar, but in two weeks, Christmas will be completely overshadowed by Ethiopia's biggest celebration of the year: Epiphany.

The celebration of Epiphany is a three day affair that begins the evening before when everyone gathers together in churches, dressed in their fanciest and finest white outfits. The crowds of people in white are contrasted with the priests, who are dressed in bright, lavish robes, and carry these giant, fancy umbrellas in blues and reds and purples, with gold tassles hanging off them. The priests also emerge with the Tabot, a replica of the Ark of the Covenant, wrapped in cloth of shimmering silk. The priests process with the crowds of people following them, until they reach a body of water. For many towns, they will process to the River Jordan. Once they arrive, the groups will stay and worship late into the night, until after 2am.

Some people will stay up all night, while others go home to rest for a few hours before returning to the river the next morning. In Ethiopia, Epiphany is not about visiting magi, but is about the baptism of Christ. So, the next morning, the Tabot is immersed in the river, commemorating Christ's baptism, the priests bless the river, and then sprinkle water on everyone who has gathered. It is a moment of worship and joy, it is a time of communities gathered, celebrating Christ and professing their faith. For the next two days, there are celebrations, shouting and singing, and more processions, until the Tabot

is led back to the church and stored away for another year.

I tell you this because it is interesting, and also because when I first heard about this, it turned upside down what I thought I knew about Christianity. First, I had always assumed everyone celebrated Christmas on December 25th. Second, I had always assumed that Christmas, if not as important as Easter to some Christian communities, would still be the next most important for most churches. For us, unless you are in worship today, it is easy to forget it is epiphany at all—I had never heard of a place where Christmas was left for the most pious of followers while Epiphany is the one day a year that no matter who you are or how often you had skipped church the previous year, you would get yourself to a church and to the river to celebrate Epiphany. Third and finally, I had always assumed Epiphany was only the celebration of the three kings bringing gifts for Jesus, and had never thought it could also be celebrated as a part of Jesus's baptism. When I heard about these differences for the first time, it was as if I had my own epiphany. Despite all these differences, the one truth that remains is that the celebration of epiphany, whether it is meeting Jesus on the banks of the River Jordan to be baptized, or whether it is journeying with the magi as they follow a star through the desert, epiphany is about looking for the moments when God's presence is revealed in our lives.

For the magi, the wise men from the East, God was revealed in the rising of a star. The magi were not locals from Jerusalem or even Bethlehem. They did not practice Judaism like most of Jesus's first followers, and they were not waiting a savior to be born. Two weeks ago at our family Christmas worship service, we held a spontaneous Nativity, with an unsuspecting cast of 50 who became sheep and angels and shepherds, complete with a costumes and a lot of chaos. It was a reminder to our children that though the story is familiar to us, Mary and Joseph were not expecting to give birth in a manger, the animals were not expecting to share their home with a baby, and the shepherds were not expecting to see angels in a field telling them to go see their newborn savior. The story of spontaneity continues with the magi, who probably were not expecting to go on a journey that would lead them to a baby king, a baby who would offer them a new way of life, a new insight into who God is and new

knowledge about what God's hopes for humanity are.

The magi arrived with their own traditions and their own beliefs in God. In many stories, it is said that the magi came from different parts of the world, a small, diverse caravan, united only in their quest to follow the star. Together, as they traveled across the desert, I imagine that they each had different hopes for their journey, about what they would find or what would be revealed to them. But none of them could have known for sure. They trusted the signs that were put before them by their God, and that was enough to sustain them on the long journey.

To be a people of epiphany means to put aside what we are told to expect and what to plan for, to make room for God to be revealed in our lives. There are so many rules and expectations in our lives that if we do this one thing, we can count on something else happening, and thus our life will be better or we will be more enlightened or peaceful or healthy or whatever it is that we are long for. I don't think it is a coincidence that the celebration of Epiphany comes so close to the New Year. For many of us, resolutions are a part of our New Year rituals, and sometimes, though not always, these resolutions are attempts to improve, to cleanse, and to enhance our lives. We often believe that if we can just do these things better, like save more money or lose weight or read more books, we will lead more meaningful lives. A lot of times we are told that if we can just accomplish this one thing, then *it will all turn out*. We are told that if we name it, carefully plan it, and finally accomplish it, we will be transformed. I'm not saying that New Years Resolutions are a bad idea; it's the part where we are told that there will be a total transformation that things get a little murky. It's something that is shouted to us constantly from magazine covers, commercials, and well meaning friends, but it can result in frustration or disappointment when that one thing doesn't end up being as life changing as it was promised to be.

On Epiphany, we are reminded that you can't plan for everything, after all, and that as we continue to search for transformation, sometimes we have to put aside our own plans and for watch for the signs around us that come from within and from above. On Epiphany, God's resolutions for us are

to let go, listen, and before anything else, follow God, even when it takes us somewhere new and unexpected.

Even in our own faith community, here at South Church, each of us is discovering God in different ways. Many of us find God on Sunday morning: in our songs and prayers, with a cup of fair-trade coffee in the Social Hall, or inside a book in the library. Others discover God through serving on a ministry team, on a Habitat site, or by teaching Church School. For many, God is outside the walls of the church, through avocation, the time spent with family or on a hiking trail. Like anywhere else, most of us are drawn to the parts of our faith that we know will bring us joy or satisfaction or where, through previous experiences, we know we are likely to have an encounter with the Holy. We are less likely to push ourselves to try something new or volunteer for a project or a ministry when we don't know whether or not it will be a good fit. We are creatures of habit, and our spare time is precious, so we want to spend it in ways that we know or can best guess will be enriching.

Even for me, though many of the things I am involved in are linked to my official job, there are always new ministries that are being born. Some I volunteer for because they are my own passions—like our animal ministry and our new library—and there are others, that, admittedly, I would have to really think about first and decide whether it would be a good match. My hope is that I can get out of my own head and my own way long enough to recognize where there might be an opportunity to serve in a way I had never imagined before, or in an area that is new with all the potential for stresses and rewards that it might involve.

That is true for all of us who are involved in this community. Our adult mission trip each year is full of returning volunteers who have come to expect a meaningful week, but we only get a small handful of new participants. Many of us commit to serving on ministry teams and committees from year to year, but rarely try a Bible or book study, or a retreat or workshop. This is, by no means, any kind of critique. It's a gentle reminder that God is present in all of these places, and that on Epiphany, God is waiting to be revealed in ways we never imagined. For me, I know that this is going to finally

be the year I push aside my instinct to sleep in and show up at Lottie's for the women's breakfast on a Wednesday morning. Not because the act of eating breakfast with good company will necessarily transform my life, but because I know God shows up there early every Wednesday, and God might have something to say to me if I show up too.

Because the word epiphany holds such a heavy weight of profound revelation and deep insight, it can be intimidating to apply to ourselves. Surely it must only be the geniuses and the most enlightened ones who can truly experience epiphany, right? We can't confuse the dictionary definition of the word with the tradition we are celebrating today. Our epiphany is a little bit different. Today, for Christians throughout the world, and in Ethiopia in two weeks from now, Epiphany is the time when we are called to follow the star that is rising before us, seeking the way God will be revealed in our lives.

We might not know what will be at the end of our journey, and we might not know what God is trying to tell us, but on Epiphany, we are asked to take this journey together. Our destinations might not be the same, or maybe they will be, but on this day, we are side by side, following our stars, together. It is journey that will be full of doubt and meandering, but also faithfulness and adventure and even joy. It is the journey of looking for God's manifestation in our lives, the experience of Christ in our midst. We are allowed to take the old familiar places with us on this Epiphany journey, as long as we leave room for the unexpected. For on this Epiphany, we are the magi, travelers without a road map, with only God as our guide. Amen.