

“Opening Their Treasure Chests”

Matthew 2:1-12
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Matthew is the only Gospel writer to include the story of the wisemen seeing the star and traveling from the East to worship the Christ child. Matthew is the one who consistently connects the dots between the prophetic utterances of old with the birth and life of Jesus. Thus, right in the middle of the story, we have the chief priests reciting for King Herod what the Prophet Micah had declared: “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.” It matters to Matthew that his faith community understand the birth of Jesus as a fulfillment of prophecy, as the keeping of a Divine promise. This is the one for whom we’ve been waiting. He’s the real deal.

The wisemen are said to have been astrologers or astronomers. They were acquainted with the stars and the planets and the galaxies. They had maps and charts. They knew all about Orion’s Belt and the Big Dipper and the North Star. Therefore, when they noticed a new star in the sky, a star never previously identified, they understood that something of a miraculous nature was unfolding in the universe. They had an epiphany! An epiphany, as you know, is a sudden, intuitive insight into the essential meaning of something. Nowadays we call these “Aha” moments, moments of divine clarity, when, suddenly, we get it!

We have on our mantel at home a wood cutting. You can look at this wood cutting from various angles, and what you see is a wood cutting. But given the exact angle of perspective, one sees clearly carved into the wood the letters J-E-S-U-S.

When you finally see these letters, it's like an epiphany; you realize you are now seeing what you had not seen before, but it was there all the time waiting to be discovered! I've placed the carving on the Communion table this morning! Have a look later on. You'll surely have an epiphany.

The epiphany that the wisemen experience, their "aha" moment, is that the Messiah's coming is meant for them, too. They are Gentiles. They are outsiders. They are not in the population of believers understood to be blessed by the Messiah. Yet, this is precisely the meaning of the appearance of the star over Bethlehem. The Messiah has come for all people in all nations in all neighborhoods in all generations. God's love is poured out without restriction! A new day has dawned not only over the Holy Land, but over the entire Creation! Thus, we speak of THE Epiphany, the sudden insight into the meaning of yonder star. There will no longer be Jew and Greek, male and female, master and slave; but all will be united under the banner of love.

When I was a boy growing up in Glastonbury, I played on one of the Little League teams. From that time, I have many very specific memories. One of them is painful. My team was playing a game at the Welles Village field. My dad was there watching me play third base. After the game, I overheard a man ask my dad, "Bob, where do you live? In the Village?" And very quickly, without missing a beat, my dad replied, "No, I live down in the south end." That brief conversation registered in my bones. Though he didn't say it in so many words, the implication of my dad's response was that the Village was somehow not the right place to live. Later that same year, I became friends with a kid my age named Skip Thomas. Some of you know him. He went on to be our Chief of Police here in Glastonbury. But at that time, 1957, Skip Thomas lived in the Village. The more I got to know Skip, the more I saw into my father's prejudice, the more I saw a kind of classism that made no sense to me, and still makes no sense to me!

Years later, reflecting on the Epiphany story, I began to see clearly that God shows no partiality, that God values the one who lives at 24 Denslow Road as much as God values the one living at 400 Main Street.

I occasionally see a bumper sticker around this time of year that says, "Wise folks still seek him." I like that bumper sticker. I want one! It's like an invitation to an openness to more epiphanies, more Aha moments, more of those sudden, intuitive insights into the meaning of things. Fortunately, one need not be an astrologer or an astronomer to see what hadn't been seen before. One only needs to be open to the "still speaking" God. It was this quality of openness that made all the difference to those wisemen from the East. It's what helped me to see through my dad's stereotypical thinking. So, I am declaring 2015 to be The Year of Openness. Let us be open to the THE Epiphany and also to the many epiphanies that will surely present themselves.

Often, it is the poets and the artists and the musicians who have these epiphanies, these moments of insight. Such was the case with our local, South Glastonbury poet, Hugh Ogden. Hugh was forever opening himself to life's meaning. In his poem, "Night Driving," he wrote:

A man runs over a jack rabbit
which has run from a clear-
cut, drives on, turns around,
drives back, gets out, wraps

the dead rabbit in newspaper,
sees in its one opened eye
something calling without
sound and thinks – this is just

a rabbit, what's this about –
then puts the newspaper in
the station wagon. A partly
cloudy sky, three stars

around Saturn when he stops
on a grassy knoll by the bridge
over the Kennebago, carries
the newspaper to the snow-melt

flooded river, picks up a flat
limestone and digs, then puts
down this mystery he's been
part of, prays, kicks sand

over the hole to level the bar,
walks back into his dream, his
journey over road-crossings
under the witness of three stars

and a planet, a night sky he
knows he can't fathom, an eye
which sees and does not see,
buried under the river's deluge.

I would run into Hugh all around South Glastonbury. And he'd always have time to stop and chat for awhile. His long white silvery hair caught my attention. But it was the gleam in his eye that revealed his constant search for meaning. I tell you he was one of those Magi of the 21st century, always ready to follow yonder star.

The good news is that there is a poet, an artist, a musician inside all of us. We are all astrologers, all astronomers, all eligible to have an epiphany, a sudden, intuitive insight into what life is all about.

And when those epiphanies come, that is when we find ourselves so filled with gratitude and joy and wonder that we reach into our treasure chests and share with the world our gold, our frankincense, and our myrrh. May this be The Year of Openness for you! In the greatest of hope, I say, Amen!