

Epiphany I (7 January 2024)

“I BESEECH you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind...”

+In the Name of...

When our first child was born, people told Danielle and me that he would grow up so fast that we would not be able to believe it. While on the whole that has been true, it pales in comparison to Holy Scripture’s treatment of the early life of Our Savior: just yesterday the Magi came from the East to worship the infant in the manger and a day later Christ is a pre-teen in the temple! If you will indulge me a little bit, I would like to back up to the Epiphany for this morning. We have the perception that it is important, but then some might think that if it were really important it would have its own Sunday. Of course, Christmas is important, and we do not move it from its feast day.

On Christmas, in fact, Christ was visited by smelly old shepherds. On Epiphany, important men from the Far East came, kings by some traditions. That sounds much more Episcopalian! We know the story: these men saw a star in the sky which they followed to find the Christ child. Maybe the question we should be asking is not why did they come, but why did everyone else NOT come? All joking about Christian pedigree aside, this is the feast for us. Not us Anglicans, but us who are not of Jewish extraction, which is most everyone in Oregon!

It reminds me of many of the visitors who stop by the church during the week. I have never served a church which gets so many visitors just wanting to see the inside of the building, but to be fair, I have never served a church with as glorious a building as this one. That being said, visitors often ask about the attendance on Sundays: they seem surprised when they learn that we do not have several services all filled to capacity. My snarky side wants to ask them, "Why are you surprised? You are not here." I do not

mean any one of them specifically, but what exactly is the logic? Your church is so beautiful, surely people come to worship here just to be able to sit in a grand atmosphere? But yet, if that is their logic, they only apply it to others and not themselves because they are not here on a Sunday morning either. The world, indeed, this city, are filled with beautiful churches that sit empty (or near empty) on Sunday mornings. Is the issue of those congregations that they did not build attractive enough buildings? What then, do we do with the church buildings that resemble shoe boxes or spaceships having crashed into the side of a hill that are overflowing? If a new star, many times larger or brighter than others, does not attract the attention of the world, why would constructing a fancy building to tell people about that star do any better?

Now don't get me wrong. I love our building and I am not saying that we should change it. The Church has long been a patron of the arts because She believes that God deserves our

best: beautiful architecture, music, and art directed the hearts and minds of the faithful to God. What I am saying is that we cannot expect it to do our evangelizing for us. If anything, this building likely looks as foreign to our unchurched neighbors as Judaism would have looked to the gentiles in first century Palestine.

The Magi began their long trek following the star. As they got closer, they stopped at Jerusalem to ask the man in charge there about this new king. I see the logic there: the new kings who have just arrived assume that the “head king” there will know about this new king. The problem is that Herod is something of a faux king. He is a puppet, but also only a Jew by conversion. So, when he learned of a new king who would lead the Jews, this rattled him more than a normal military challenger would. He feared that he would be exposed for the fraud he was and replaced. The Magi were doing the equivalent of a Christian moving to a new town and stopping by the American Atheist Society for church recommendations! The prophets had been saying that He would

come; what better time than when a false king is occupying the throne? Yet despite the fact that the Magi had stopped in Jerusalem, and Herod requested the details from the experts in the Sanhedrin of where the Messiah would be born, none of the scribes, priests, or other experts in the law accompanied them. Did they not believe their religion's own prophecies? Did they not believe that the journey could be instigated by these foreigners, these gentiles from parts unknown?

But the Magi did not find a King in the way they were expecting. No palace or regal residence for this King: a stable containing a helpless baby, dependent on His parents for all His basic needs. Yet the magi still lavished Him with the finest gifts their countries had to offer: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gold was a gift appropriate for a king, the incense was used in worship, so it signified His divinity, and myrrh is used in burials, thus signifying His humanity: King, God, and man.

I cannot leave the Christmas season behind without at least one *It's a Wonderful Life* reference: most people believe that if they do not do something there will always be someone else there to pick up the slack. George Bailey had the privilege of seeing what the world would have been like without him. It was not a pleasant place. While we will not have that privilege, and privately we may believe we are not as important as George Bailey, but whose life might be affected by our walk with Christ? The Magi led the Gentiles to Christ when no one else would. How are you manifesting Christ in your life to the ignorant world? The epistle this morning says we must give God our “reasonable service” and not be “conformed to this world”. It’s hard to go against the grain. You might get laughed at, or worse. George Bailey did it. The Magi did it. Pray that you and I might do it when the good Lord calls upon us.

+In the Name...