

Year B, January 6, 2019
The Epiphany
Christ Church, Mexia

Epiphany was not something about which I knew growing up. The “wise men” as we called them were part of the nativity set, part of the Christmas celebration. We assumed they came soon after the shepherds had visited Jesus in the manger and offered their gifts there. Even after joining the Episcopal church, I didn’t think much about it – it’s the twelfth day of Christmas after all.

It’s a lovely story, though perhaps a little short on details. We always said three wise men – most likely because three gifts are specifically mentioned. Surely, even if there were only three magi, there would have been others to attend to them, care for the camels, possibly provide security, etc. We made a lot of assumptions, like it happened in Bethlehem. Well, that’s where Jesus was born, we’re told, and Herod sent them there – but, I didn’t think much about the part where they followed the star to where Jesus was. Maybe he wasn’t in Bethlehem at that time. And how did I miss the part about “the house,” the house, not a stable.

But I’m getting bogged down in the details and what is missing, when I should be looking at the overall message or messages being conveyed by the scripture. After all, this is not a historical account. And epiphany is defined (by Merriam-Webster) as: “a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something; an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking; an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure; or a revealing scene or moment.”

Prof. Kendra Hotz (Rhodes College) explains it this way: “There comes some moment when an important truth suddenly becomes clear, and we can reinterpret our past and rethink our way forward in light of it.” So, this is clearly an important event – it affects our view of the past and the future. As she goes on to say: “Epiphany points us to God’s universal love and universal sovereignty.” Recall the words from Isaiah: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” The birth, the star, all of these things happen not just for Israel, but for the world! For everyone! Here is one of the essential elements of this story.

Br. Jim Woodrum, SSJE, points out that "Everything in creation requires a time of gestation; canyons took millions of years to be formed by rivers of water; the oldest known Sequoia tree is supposed to have taken 3,266 years to grow; babies are not ready to be delivered at conception." We don't know how long the magi traveled, but it is safe to assume it was a long, slow journey. And that is another element of the story – our spiritual development takes time. It doesn't happen in an instance, and we have to be active in our search – we have to expend energy to achieve our goal, our epiphany.

Based upon what Prof. Holtz said, the definitions, etc., we can also look at epiphany as a change of heart. In the words of Bp. Jake Owensby, Episcopal Diocese of Western Louisiana: "...transforming hardened hearts is central to God's ongoing work throughout the biblical narrative. Listen to these words from the prophet Ezekiel: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.'" (Eze 36:26) Can there be a better description for a personal epiphany?

He continues: "A hardened heart is more than an indifferent attitude or even a tendency toward cruelty. It is a way of being in this world opposed to the way of love that is the Kingdom of God... In the Bible, Empire always stands in deadly opposition to the Kingdom of God. Whether it's the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, or the Romans, Empires make the world according (to the rules of) a hardened heart. In her poem *Of the Empire*, Mary Oliver (writes):

'We will be known as a culture that feared death and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity for the few and cared little for penury of the many. We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke little if at all about the quality of life for people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All the world, in our eyes, they will say was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.'

By contrast, the hearts of flesh given by God inhabit a creation teeming with the beloved creatures of God. No one and nothing exists

for my exploitation. Each being deserves my respect and invites my awe. Everyone and everything vibrates with the presence of our common Maker. At least, that is the vision and the promise. Jesus came to guide us into this change of heart.”

To me that is the essence of The Epiphany we celebrate today. We are all led to Jesus in different ways, and we must be open to those differences. Enjoy the story of the magi lead by the star. Hopefully, you have found Jesus also or soon will.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.
Amen.