

Meditation Epiphany Sunday January 6, 2013 Matthew 2:1-12, 13-23 Isaiah 60:1-6  
“Our Choice”

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.”

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the manifestation of the Light of Christ for the world, and we hear gospel-writer Matthew’s story of the Magi - non-Jewish scholars - following the star to Bethlehem.

Matthew tells a very different story than we heard in the Gospel of Luke: -- Instead of shepherds, Matthew gives us Magi from the East. -- Instead of a stable, Matthew takes us to Herod's palace. -- Instead of a manger, Matthew shows us gifts fit for a king. -- Instead of angels, Matthew talks about dreams. Though we tend to imagine the shepherds and wise men gathered together around the manger, the shepherds came from nearby and the wise men from afar. The wise men's visit probably took place long after the shepherds had returned to their flocks. Mary and Joseph remained in the vicinity of Bethlehem and Jerusalem until Jesus had been circumcised and presented in the temple (Luke 2:22-38). Mary also needed time to recover from the delivery before traveling to Nazareth. Presumably the wise men visited during the latter part of Mary and Joseph's visit to Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Matthew includes a number of dark elements in his story: -- At first, he tells us, Joseph resolved to put his fiancé Mary away quietly after she told him of her pregnancy (1:19). -- Herod killed babies in an attempt to do away with the newborn king (2:16-18). -- Joseph and his family fled to Egypt to escape the murderous king (2:13-15). -- When Joseph and his family returned from Egypt, they went to Nazareth instead of Bethlehem because another violent king was ruling in Judea (2:19-23). (Presented by Richard Donovan, Sermonwriter; substantially edited by fte)

It is important to remember that the wise men were Gentiles, not Jews. Matthew's Gospel is very Jewish; he wants the reader to see that Jesus satisfied the prophecies in the OPT about the coming Messiah. So it is significant that he introduces these Gentile - non-Jewish - worshipers at the beginning, preparing us for Jesus' last words to his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations..." (28:19). Be sure to notice the tremendous contrast between these Gentiles, who followed the star to Jesus, and the chief priests and scribes of the Jews, who spent their lives studying the scriptures but who did nothing to seek out the Messiah, whom they had determined to be just six miles away in Bethlehem (v. 5). In other words, God's chosen people ignored the Messiah while some pagans eagerly sought him out. Gospel-writer Matthew wanted to make sure that we understand this.

Today, as we observe Epiphany, what are we to learn from this season’s story? We do well to keep in mind and heart the fact that, from the very beginning and all through Jesus’ life and probably all the way until right now, 2013, the folks who should have recognized the Light of God’s work in the world ended up being blind to it while those who were “outsiders” saw the star and were willing to follow it...

We must remember, also, that Jesus came into the world at a very dark time. Not only were most people poor in Jesus' day, the land of Judah was occupied by Roman rule. The Jewish leaders cow-towed to the Romans, worrying more about their own comforts than about the well-being of the Jewish people. In fact, from today's report by Gospel-writer Matthew, we know that King Herod was willing to have hundreds of children slaughtered in order to destroy a possible threat to his own power. Herod was sleazy, lying to the visitors from the East when he said that he, too, wanted to worship the new king. We know that his only concern about the new king was how to get rid of it. It was a dark time for the people of Judah and for the world. ...Not so different from today. Some notice the light of God and seek to honor it, giving up their own agendas, getting down on their knees to honor what God is doing; others grab hold of their own "power" and do anything they can to fight to keep it.

There is much hope for the world in this story, for try as he did, Herod was not able to derail God's plan for the salvation of the world. The Herods of this world are no match for God -- or for God's people -- then or now.

Much more of a challenge is each human heart. The Light has come into the world, but we are not always willing to receive it. We tend to want things our own way; WE want to be "king" of our lives. Knowing this about us, God asks us to make a hard choice: God asks us to trust God even when things are not the way we expect or want them to be.

The wise scholars followed the strange star and didn't stop even when it led them, not to an impressive palace, but to a humble house where a poor couple took care of their baby. God doesn't always lead us where we think we ought to go. If we really follow, there's no telling where we will be led. But if we really follow, we will find Light and life and hope and God's love, all in new ways and in new intensity.

There's a silly old story of a man who went into a hardware store to buy a saw. The proprietor offered him a chain saw, telling him that it would cut up to 12 cords of wood a day. The man was delighted. He bought the saw and went home, but was back in two days, totally disgusted. "This thing is no good! Why, you said it would cut 12 cords a day, but I can barely get through a half a cord before I'm just about dead! Take this thing back!" Puzzled, the proprietor took the saw and pulled the cord. When the saw sprang to life with a good roar, the customer yelled, "What in the world?!?" It turns out that the customer had never turned on the power, but instead had tried to use the heavy saw manually, pushing it back and forth across each log. Crazy, and probably not true. But perhaps we Christians also forget to let the power of God be free to work in our lives. My way, God...but please bless what I want you to bless... God asks us to dare to choose GOD's way for our lives. This is a choice we must make every day. The Light was given through Jesus Christ to us, offering forgiveness and salvation once and for all, but we must decide whether to receive this gift and respond to it every day.

A light shines in the darkness. Isaiah proclaimed, "Darkness covers the earth...But upon you the Lord shines.." Every time I read these words from Isaiah, I think of a man named Frank, who was a member of the first church I served as pastor. Frank was down-to-earth. He and his wife,

Dorothy, had been through tough times, including her almost-fatal bout with Hodgkins Disease and then her fractured spine. They also struggled with their one son's failed marriage and inclination to drink and get into trouble, and their ability to accept their other son's relationship with another man. They struggled, and they came up trusting and hoping in God. Every Sunday, no matter what, Dot and Frank were in church. When we needed a Sunday School teacher because God suddenly gave our church some young families with children, it was Dorothy who stepped forward with her 70+ years of experience in getting to know God and offered herself to this ministry.

A couple of years later, though, Frank got sick. It was cancer, and nothing the doctors did was able to keep it from progressing. Finally, Frank was admitted to Connecticut Hospice (this was in the 1980's) in Branford. He was weak and he knew he was going to die. He also knew how distraught I was, since all our prayers and hoping hadn't seemed to have helped. On one of my visits, he told me, "When things seem dark, I look up at the stars. They're so much easier to see when it's dark. The darker it gets, the more the light shines. It's the same for me with my life and God. The worse things get, the better I can see God."

It was a pretty good lesson for a neophyte preacher to be taught. It still is a good lesson, for all of us.

It's our choice whether to be those who "notice the star" or those who continue to focus on the darkness of the world. It's our choice whether to follow the Source of power for life or to keep on plugging along relying only on our own strength and desires. God has given us free will, but God has also given us God's-self – and the promise of LIFE today and forever – if we will but receive him.

The Wise ones let the Star lead them to Bethlehem. They dropped down on their knees in a place they did not expect to be and offered what they had to the Lord. May we notice the ways God is leading us to find hope and new life in Christ as well. May we be willing to let Jesus Christ be king of our world and of our lives. Then it may be said about us as well: Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you." Thanks be to God! Amen.