New Hope Global Sermon 1 5 21 Progressive Epiphany

**Introduction**

Epiphany. An awakening. A revelation. A spiritual aha. A time when God breaks through the disappointed hopes, false expectations and normal doctrines of our faith and practice and does something new. In the scripture, it is also the fulfillment of a promise. In Isaiah 43: 18 God says; “Forget the former things. Do not dwell on the past; see I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?”

Something new. The story of the magi is a New Testament story of something new. It’s about revelation to pagan spiritual priests and astrologers in the service of Persia who come from the Babylon area to worship the newborn King of the Jews. The church celebrates their story on January 6th and it is on national calendars as Epiphany. The magi’s journey has much to teach us. But in significant ways the traditional version we celebrate in our churches is romanticized and not reflective of all the real facts. That reality has much to teach us as well.

**The story of the magi**

A historical recounting of the magi’s journey is different from the romanticized version that skips over the implication of the length and sacrifice of their journey, the number of magi who took the trip, their need for help from outsiders, the fanatical jealousy of Herod the King, and the level of their spiritual understanding in worshipping the “King of the Jews.” I believe these facts together create the progressive epiphany that was the magi’s experience. Consider the points along the way.

First, their Epiphany in this story starts with an unusual convergence of stars or planets that appeared in the heavens and caught the attention of a group of Gentile spiritual advisers in Persia:

They were leading figures in the religious court life of their country or origin, employing a variety

of scientific (astrology) diplomatic (wisdom) and religious (magical incantations) elements in their work…They had apparently been exposed to Old Testament prophesies from Jewish colonies situated in the east, . . as there were significant Jewish centers of learning in Babylon at the time of the Magi. (Michael Wilkins, the Niv Application Commentary, Matthew, Zondervan, 2004, p. 95).

Determining that the star or comet or confluence of planets was God’s sign of the birth of the one born King of the Jews, these magi set out for Jerusalem to find this King and present to him their costly gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. That much is faithful to the Christian tradition that has grown up around the story.

But, the historical facts seem to indicate that from the appearance of the star until the magi’s arrival in Jerusalem was several months. The journey itself was likely 900 miles, traveled by camel over a large terrain. Somehow, in our Christian retelling, the magi just suddenly appear in Jerusalem and the length of time it took to travel, and the hazards of the very journey are almost forgotten. Similarly, in our own journeys when we are following a dream or direction from God, there is often this same long distance and time of travel amid difficult circumstances and terrain. It is not a journey for the faint of heart, but only a journey that can be continued when we press on to realize what God has called us to.

Secondly, because of the length of the journey and the dangers in traveling through potentially hostile territory, the magi likely had many others in their party who were servants and soldiers to care for them and protect them along the way. That means they showed up in Jerusalem in a very large group – not the 3 magi traditionally celebrated in Christian tradition. The Passion footnote for Mt. 2:3 notes: “Although we are not told how many “wise men” came to visit Bethlehem, it was likely quite a large entourage. It is doubtful that three men from Persia would cause such an uproar and commotion in the city. There were possibly over one hundred who traveled in the caravan from the East arriving in Jerusalem,” (The Passion Translation, Mt. 2:3, pg. 9). This is another important application for the contemporary Christian. When we are following God’s direction in the realization of a calling or a dream, it is best if we are not journeying alone. We need others who can help us along the way as well as those who are there to protect us.

This has certainly been our experience in moving back to Wheaton for our final years. The call of my own stewardship as a global Christian has led me back to continue to fulfill that calling in Wheaton, both with the new international students at Wheaton Grad School and with those of many cultures whom we have befriended over the decades of our previous years here. In fact, those who have consistently helped us practically in providing furniture, time, shopping trips for the months when we did not have a caregiver, etc. are from Japan, China, Indonesia, and Brazil and Sri Lanka, as well as Caucasians from the United States. The evidence of their giving is seen in our furnishings in every room of our house.

Then, because the journey down to Florida and back has taken place over many, many months, we needed the spiritual protection provided by friends who are intercessors. The magi traveled in a large caravan to pursue their calling. Satan is always trying to distract, discourage and defeat those who follow God, so our need for prayer warriors who have covered us over these years has been intense. Keith’s descent into the later stages of Alzheimers has only accentuated the problems and the need for continual prayer covering. The magi needed solders in their caravan. We have needed spiritual prayer warriors in ours. And the fruit of those prayers has been seen in Keith’s positive behavior on moving day and once we’ve settled in our new home.

A person and person posing for a picture

Description automatically generated with low confidenceThird, these Gentile, wealthy priests from Persia needed the help of Jewish scholars in Jerusalem to determine the exact location of the new baby’s birth. The Jewish scholars cited Bethlehem as the predicted birth place of the Messiah. The magi took their advice and headed to Bethlehem. Unfortunately, the Jewish scholars did not follow suit. They had knowledge of the scripture that they refused to act on and use it as a source of direction in their journey. Psalm 84:5-6 says “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca (or weeping), they make it a place of springs.” God will champion each Jesus disciple who “sets their hearts on pilgrimage” and will lead us to find others from other cultures or backgrounds who can help us move forward in our spiritual obedience to God’s call. Progressive epiphany means that the ultimate realization of our calling often is not completely mapped out for us as we move forward in faith. We need the help and protection of others, and we need the resources of those, who we may call outsiders, who don’t normally travel with us.

Fourth, God’s guidance is seen again as the star reappears over Bethlehem to lead the magi to the house where Jesus was living with his parents. Matthew recounts that the magi “were overjoyed at the reappearance of the star.” Similarly, when we are totally dependent on God’s direction and guidance in our own journey, we become overjoyed at each God-sighting. God was actively directing the magi from the onset, and the reappearance of the star just reenforced their calling and the ultimate epiphany in reaching the Christ-child and presenting their costly gifts to him. They likely did not fully comprehend the significance of the incarnation – that they were paying homage to God come in the flesh. But God used their coming to Jesus’s birth as a sign that Jesus alone will bring salvation to the whole world – Jews and Gentiles alike. God then intervened again after they had presented their gifts to Jesus when an angel warned them not to return to Jerusalem to tell Herod about their worship of the baby Jesus. They listened and obeyed and took a lengthy, costly detour in the return to the East, but they did it with full hearts.

**Conclusion**

Beloved, when our hearts are set on pilgrimage, God is the One who guides and directs us. But many times, we need to persevere in His timing and direction. We need to be content with progressive illumination. We need the perseverance to press on when “the valleys are deep, the mountains are steep, the body is weary, and we stumble and fall” (song Press On by Selah). We need to keep the original calling before us as we travel with others who serve and help and pray for us; we need to seek out those of other backgrounds who can help us get to our proper destination; we need to look for the God-sightings that will make our next steps very clear and specific, and we need to present our gifts of thanksgiving to the Lord in gratitude for our epiphanies of His character, His hand in guidance, His people who accompany us, His revelation of our life and purpose.

And, this is a lesson particularly from the story of the magi in Matthew 2 and in contemporary Christian tradition: we need to cast off our romanticized version of how quickly and easily it is to find God’s way and walk in it. Life is much more complicated than we often acknowledge. And our need for God’s continual guidance and the help of others is also more critical than we may admit. If we only hold onto our romanticized expectations of how quickly God brings things to pass that He has promised in our lives, we set ourselves up for disappointment, discouragement, and defeat as we try to recreate our fairytale version of Christian living. Instead, God calls us to model the perseverance, faith and grace needed to trust in God’s goodness, mercy and grace. May we each remain faithful to His calling and satisfied with God’s methods of progressive epiphanies. For His sake. Amen. Dr. Mary Lou Codman-Wilson, Pastor, New Hope Global Fellowship 1 6 22