

January 7 2018

Epiphany

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Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Gracious and Holy God, you know that all the words I am about to speak pass through unclean lips. By Your Grace let only those washed by the blessing of Your Truth take root in the hearts of those who hear. Amen

Good morning!

Today we celebrate the Epiphany. If you look on the Episcopal Church's website, The Epiphany is "The manifestation of Christ to the peoples of the earth", and it begins the Epiphany Season, which takes us through Ash Wednesday.

Today, I celebrate that I've finally been assigned a Gospel passage that does not end with weeping and gnashing of teeth. Yay!

We begin with the Visit of the Wise Men, from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 2, Verses 1-12. My initial excitement about the lack of gnashing teeth faded as I read and reread the familiar story, because I was really struggling to find a way into it. It was somehow evading deep scrutiny, like the last cherry tomato evades your fork. You chase it around your bowl, trying desperately to spear it, and watching it slip away again and again, remaining perfect and unbroken.

It doesn't help that the historical elements of this story are so compelling to think about. You have this tantalizing intersection with the life of Herod the Great, a person who is known of and studied by Biblical and Non-Biblical scholars alike. As a result you've got a pretty firm date and a pretty firm location, and because this man existed, for real, you've a morsel of the Holy Bible that is empirically true. Suddenly you're down the online rabbit hole of historical-ish

speculation, because you feel that you might be able to find other empirically true things about this story! Who were these Wise Men? What star did they follow? Where exactly did they come from? Why did they bring those three particular gifts?

An hour or so later, I realized that the relentless searching for the when and where and who was only causing me to reduce this passage to a historical record of an event, a time capsule. and it left me feeling kind of blah. I once again had to learn the lesson that this is not a history textbook. I had briefly forgotten that the Bible is a living spiritual document. We're not supposed to fill in all the cracks, because then the light can't come in, the air can't move, and you've got the Holy Scripture trapped in a tomb. So while there will always be intersections between scriptural stories and extra-biblical historical figures, I can't let that draw me away from the spiritual message, because the point of interacting with this text is not to get an accurate historical account, but to interact with the living God. What is the Spirit saying to the people?

Setting aside the historical aspects, I still was left with a cherry tomato in the bottom of the bowl, and my supremely insufficient fork. No matter how many times I read it, it just slipped by, a nice story to round out the the Christmas season. The problem, I realized, was that I was trying to read this story the way that I read the Gospel parables. I was asking, "who am I in this story?", but I found that I couldn't really inhabit this story the way I can with the Parable of the Talents, or the Prodigal Son, or the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. I needed a different way in.

If you've spent any amount of time in the Episcopal Church, you know that half the battle is knowing what to do at what time at various point of the Liturgy. Do I stand, do I sit, do I kneel? Do we sing this part or speak it? Once you've got the mechanics of it down, then it helps to have an understanding of the flow of the Liturgical calendar, which is on a three year cycle, and is broken up into seasons. Now Advent, Lent, Easter, those I knew about, but I ended up going back to the Episcopal Church's

website to find out what we are supposed to be doing during Epiphany. It says "We are called to respond to Christ in faith through the showings of his divinity recorded in the gospels of the Epiphany season." Ah, OK. That's why the message of the passage was eluding me. It's not intended for me to necessarily look for parallels to my own life and experience the way that I do with the parables. With that in mind I went back and began to look at the the people's actions, see how they were responding to the reality of Jesus' divinity.

In the Gospel passage, the Wise Men's response was to load up treasure and set off following a star so that they might bestow gifts and pay homage. In the verses of Matthew's Gospel that follow today's readings, we discover Herod's paranoid scheming, with his failed attempt to find the Shepherd of Israel causing him to order the slaughter of innocent children. Mary and Joseph, warned of this coming atrocity, abandon their home and their lives to live in exile in Egypt for years. In the Epistle, we find Paul writing his letter proclaiming his faith in Christ while imprisoned for proclaiming his faith in Christ.

Long journeys. Gifts. Murder. Imprisonment. These are not small gestures, these are over-the-top crazy out-there responses. I mean, the wise men could have just sent a servant with a fruit basket. Why risk the journey, why spend the gold and the spice, why risk the wrath of Herod?

Because God had come.

Jesus.

Word made Flesh.

When brought face to face with the reality of Jesus, their response was EXTRAVAGANT.

In her sermon last week, Reverend Jean Jersey told a story about her experiences with her hand mixer. Somehow it had gotten bent, and while it technically still worked, it was making some very peculiar noises. Her first response was that she needed to

go buy a new one, which seems to be a perfectly normal response, and I would have had the same. But she shared that she'd been thinking a lot about the greed and materialism that have become part and parcel of the modern Christmas celebration, and so she was shocked that her first response when her mixer started working less than perfectly was that she needed to buy a new one.

Her story reminded me how easy it is to adopt the attitudes and beliefs of the culture surrounding us, whether we actively choose to or not. We are relentlessly bombarded with the merits of capitalism; advertising is in every form of media we consume. Just being exposed to it day in and day out will inevitably embed it in our psyche, and if unexamined we may in fact act on it, seemingly automatically. Sometimes I don't even notice it anymore, it's just one more annoying popup window, one more ad in the magazine. In my mind I tell myself I'm immune to it, but then the car needs some repairs and I find myself driving off the lot with a new one. Or I find myself in line at Walmart buying a new toaster oven because I can't get the window clean any more on my old one, and I'll pick up this new coffee maker not because I need one but because it's a good deal.

Here in Vermont we are in one of the least religious states in America. I don't know about you, but outside of my home and church activities, most of my time is spent around people who either don't believe in God or don't really talk about it. Among coworkers, bandmates, riding buddies, it's easier to just not mention my faith, kind of go with the flow. So even though I spend a lot of time thinking about what God may want for or from me, what I can do to serve my community better, I'm shocked to sometimes find my actions, my responses, indicate that I've adopted the attitudes and beliefs of the culture, despite all my pious ruminations. I will find myself forcing a laugh at the cruel joke, joining in a fruitless political shouting match, blithely accepting as birthright the fruits of my own privilege, which are afforded to me as a middle class white American male, and thereby rendering myself indistinguishable from those who don't believe in the divinity of Jesus.

During Advent, we heard in Isaiah of a voice crying out:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God”*

As I stand here on the precipice of Epiphany Season, this phrase has taken on a new meaning for me. The wilderness and the desert represent those areas of my life where I have unwittingly adopted the attitudes and beliefs of our culture, and have allowed those attitudes and beliefs to influence my actions, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill, but either way without intent. Entering into the Epiphany Season wherein we will all come face to face with the stories of the divinity of Jesus, of God Incarnate, revealed to us through word and spirit and song and worship. We must prepare the way, we must make straight in the desert a highway for our God to enter into our hearts, our souls, our minds and allow God to become the influencer of our thoughts, words, and deeds, so that we will have no choice but to stop hiding behind the conventions and expectations of our culture, and just go out and do the good work that's been given us to do.

Jesus, Divine Son of God, is revealed to us. We, guided by the Holy Spirit, are the hands and feet of Jesus, and therefore the words of the psalmist illustrate OUR call;

*to deliver the poor who cries out in distress
and the oppressed who has no helper
to have pity on the lowly and poor
to preserve the lives of the needy
to redeem their lives from oppression and violence*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, what should our response be?

EXTRAVAGANT

What will it actually be? Well that's what we're here for. To figure it out together.

Amen