

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany, January 6, 2013, dedicated to Elizabeth Stein, who passed away January 5, to Marti Rideout in grateful thanksgiving for her ministry of music, especially as our interim for the past six months, and always to the glory of God!

“Light Shine”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

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With Matthew’s epiphany story, Christmas takes a turn from birth to survival – from mom and baby toward Holy Family running for their lives. The movement from Luke to Matthew is dramatic. Exit shepherds, enter wise men; exit stables, enter palace; exit poverty, enter wealth; exit humility, enter power; exit angels, enter dream sequences; exit Mary’s lullaby, enter Rachel weeping for the slaughter of the holy innocents.

The truth is we do not know much at all about the Magi from the Bible. We do not know who they were. We do not know where they came from. We do not know how many there were (although we just sang *We **Three** Kings of Orient Are*). We do not even know that they were wise, only magicians or astrologers. We know nothing about camels. We assume they had resources because poor people do not generally carry gold, frankincense and myrrh. We do not know where they started from, if they came together, or how long it took them to get to Bethlehem. We don’t even know how old Jesus was when they arrived. We are not even sure about

the famous star they “followed” - only that it was west of their point of departure because they came from the “east.”

Tradition tells us more than the gospel of these travelers of old. Ten years ago, in an article in the *Miami Herald*, Dave Barry wrote of the magi. His story has stuck with me through the years. He says we are presented with solid evidence of one fact: **they were men** - because their gifts were not wrapped. In his piece, *“Well-wrapped gift presents a challenge to the wisest of men,”* Barry, a full-time humorist and (apparently) a part-time biblical scholar, wrote that we know the magi were men because Matthew's gospel makes absolutely no reference to gift-wrapping. (To which I add: men of First Church, forthwith, let it be known that you are biblical men of God if you do not wrap your Christmas gifts. Consider this gospel truth and it is for your liberation for all Christmases to come! And please – pass the word to others who seek to live a biblically-centered life – especially during the holidays!).

The truth is, the facts of this story tell us little about these **men**. We know their arrival was delayed. We know they were curious. We know they longed to give (and receive) gifts from the king of the Jews. We know they met Herod the King and found him to be the evil despot he was and baby-killer he was about to become. We know they arrived, shared their gifts, and they went home another way. But ultimately, stories such as this are not about what we know and they are not about historical facts. For us, they are stories about finding our way home to God and living fully in the light God shines on us.

In the Magi, we encounter parts of ourselves - curious, longing, seeking, searching, traveling, following stars, following signs. Like the Magi, we sometimes stop to ask questions of people like Herod, who have no right answers, and whose own questions follow another set of assumptions and desired outcomes. Like the Magi, we approach God with all our curiosity and longing. And having encountered God in our off-beat ways and off-the-trail experiences, we, like the Magi, are changed

forever. As those who have been changed by our encounters with God, we eventually find our way home. Often, like the Magi, we find our way home by another way.

We head home by another way because the original path doesn't feel like the right path anymore. Or sometimes we head home by another way knowing that the curious ones we encountered on our original route were not truly wishing to get to know God, rather, their intentions were to trap God and essentially to kill God! I don't know about you, but I have all too often found that some of the supposed "God worshipers" I have encountered on my journey have been more interested in destroying the God of grace, truth, gentleness and compassion, rather than in seeking him to worship him. They would rather have me (and everyone else), worship their God - a God of negativity, death and most significantly a God of fear. In other words, a God who is not God as we know him in Jesus Christ!

Today is Epiphany. Epiphany means "the manifestation of God." As we celebrate the "manifestation of God in Jesus Christ," I am left wondering (and yes, sometimes "wandering" like the Magi), why God chose to come in the form of a human being, especially a human born of a peasant woman in 1st century Palestine.

I have always liked what St. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, said in the early years of the 4th century. Writing on "why" God came to earth as a human and not in some other form, Athanasius wrote:

Now if they ask, Why then did He not appear by means of other and nobler parts of creation, and use some nobler instrument, as the sun, or moon, or stars, or fire, or air, instead of man merely?

Let them know that the Lord came not to make a display, but to heal and teach those who were suffering. For the way for one aiming at display would be just to appear and to dazzle the

beholders; but for one seeking to heal and to teach the way is not simply to sojourn here, but to give himself to the aid of those in want, and to appear as they who need him can bear it; that he may not, by exceeding the requirements of the sufferers, trouble the very persons that need him, rendering God's appearance useless to them.

Now nothing in God's creation had gone astray with regard to their notions of GOD, save man only. Why, neither the sun nor moon nor heaven, nor the stars, nor water, nor air had swerved from their order: but knowing their Creator and Sovereign Word, they remained as they were.

But humanity (men) alone having rejected what was good, then devised things of nought instead of the truth, and have ascribed the honour due to God and knowledge of Him to demons and men in the shapes of stones.

*With reason, then, since it were unworthy of Divine Goodness to overlook so grave a matter, while yet men could not recognize Him as ordering and guiding the whole, God took to Himself as an instrument a part of the whole, the human body, and united Himself with that, in order that since humans could not recognize Him in the whole they should not fail to know Him in part; and since they could not look up to His invisible power, might be able at any rate, from what resembled themselves, to reason to Him and to contemplate Him. (From St. Athanasius, as quoted in *Where to Find God*, Day 17, from a book of reflections, given to me by Chalmers Coe).*

As we wander and wonder in search of the manifestation of God, Athanasius' words might assist us, like a road map to the heart of God. The key comes in the words, "*The Lord came not to make a display, but to heal and teach those who were suffering.*" How simple. How true.

On the way to the manger, he became the fulfillment of hope for the prophet and preacher who spoke of him. For the shepherds who ran from the hills to witness his birth, he taught them – poor as they were - that they mattered in the revelation of God. He healed them of their feelings of inadequacy and lack of importance. For the Magi, the newborn Christ taught them that the journey to follow God’s light shining above and within the human heart. To follow the “light shine” of God **becomes the destination** and that on the journey to God, the Magi were healed of their need to wander. They learned, along with all of us, that once you have encountered the living God on the road of life, you can never return the same way home because everything has changed.

The manifestation of God comes to us as an epiphany. On our way to the manger, we are ultimately traveling the way of the cross. For in Jesus’ birth is his death and in his death there is a resurrection!

Our journey is just beginning. But the joy is in the journey. And we are never alone. And we can never go home by the way we have come. Like the Magi, follow the light shine of God. We will follow home. But having encountered the Christ, we will go home by another way. Amen.