

“Sourcing Our Power”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
January 7, 2024 **** Epiphany Sunday

When we imagine the star of Bethlehem, we think of it as something really grand and bright that lights up not only the Bethlehem sky, but also can be seen from the nations surrounding it. We think of a star that beckons the magi, but also the shepherds, and hovers as well over the stable where the baby Christ himself slept, basking the holy family in light.

But the truth is, the bible only mentions the magi as seeing the star and knowing what it meant. Even Herod, who was desperate to find this baby who was announced to be the Messiah— a threat not only to his ruling power, but also to the entire Roman empire— knew nothing about this star or how to follow it.

Scholars believe that the magi weren't kings, but astronomers who came from Persia— in modern times, we know it to be Iran. They were likely not Jews, but priests from the Zoroastrian religion. This religion began in the 6th century BCE. One of the key elements of this religion is the belief in the coming of a Savior. Magi also had a practice of interpreting dreams, and were considered healers who used herbal remedies. In a New York Times article called “Secret Lives of the Wise Men,” Paul William Roberts wrote that the Magi were known to appear at celebrations of powerful people, and it was not always clear if they were there to “bless or blame, condone or condemn, and frequently they leave without explaining the purpose of their visit... therefore, they were both “feared and respected.”

Matthew, who goes out of the way to show that Jesus is the Messiah who had been promised to the Jews, also goes out of his way to include these priests from another land and another faith who have seen the revelation— in the form of a star— that opens them to seeing Jesus as the Messiah born to them, and to the whole world, too.

It is a vision that Herod cannot see. The star either isn't available to him, or he doesn't have the tools to see it. He is not alone in the inability to see. To many of us, an awareness of Jesus in our lives can be elusive, hard to find, just as peace between the nations is hard to find. The awareness is hard to find; peace is hard to find; and yet we are called— like the magi— to keep seeking.

Epiphany means “showing forth.” The star from today, the baptism of Jesus we will recall next Sunday, and the following Sundays in Epiphany all involve a showing forth of who Jesus is. I am hopeful that our hearing of scripture today and in the coming weeks can help to uncover the hiddenness of who Jesus Christ is, and where he might be found, to those who want to find him to pay him homage (as for those who, like Herod, seek the child only to destroy him? Well, if my sermons offer any kind of road map to finding Jesus, I hope they bore those people to sleep.)

I often think about Julian of Norwich during the season of Epiphany. She was a Christian mystic who lived during the 13th and 14th centuries. She became seriously ill, and from that experience wrote of “Shewings” of Jesus Christ. In one of her Showings, a mere hazelnut becomes a revelation of all that is holy and divine:

And in this he showed me a little thing
the quantity of a hazelnut,
lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed.
And it was as round as any ball.

I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding,
and thought, ‘What may this be?’
And it was answered generally thus,
“It is all that is made.”

I marveled how it might last,
for I thought it might
suddenly have fallen to nothing
for littleness.

And I was answered in my understanding:
It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it.
And so have all things their beginning
by the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties.
The first is that God made it.
The second that God loves it.
And the third, that God keeps it.

We are like that hazelnut. God made us. God loves us. God keeps us. But these truths often seem hidden from us, and we forget the power of the holy within us. And if our own insecurities weren’t enough to obscure God’s incarnational dwelling in us, plenty of external voices and pressures cover that beautiful truth as well and cause us to forget just how close God is to us.

Over the weekend I saw the new movie musical, *The Color Purple*. This book has long been one of my favorites, and I enjoyed the first movie that was made and the Broadway musical as well. Watching this version of it during the season of Epiphany reminded me again of the power of that story. The main character, Celie, is told by the people closest to her that she is unlovable: “You’re black. You’re poor. You’re ugly. You’re a woman. You’re nothing,” her abuser tells her.

But someone else befriends her, and loves her, and shows her that God is within her, and that she is beautiful, and that she is something and someone. Shug tells Celie, “God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for.” As this truth becomes revealed in Celie, she finds a source for her power and it changes her life.

Today you will be invited to pick a star to bring with you. On the back of the star is a word– try to keep the star you have chosen; don’t sort through to find your favorite word– although I will allow you to trade stars as gifts to one another after worship. Consider the word you end up with as an invitation as a way to see God more closely in the coming year. The word may reveal something that you need more of. Or it may reveal something that you already have, and can share with others. It may reveal something about your seeking or finding Christ. If you would like, you can email me your word and I will share with you a bible verse connected to it, for further meditation.

As we look for ways to reveal the hidden Christ in our lives, may we find what we are searching for. As Christ becomes revealed to, and within us, may we find a source of power in our lives that transforms us inwardly, and also has the power to bring transformation beyond ourselves.