



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, January 5, 2020
The Feast of the Epiphany

Solemn Evensong
at 4:00 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Matthew 2:1-12
+

Restless

“Deep midwinter, the dark centre of the year,
Wake, O earth, awake,
Out on the hills a star appears,
Here lies the way for pilgrim kings,
Three magi on an ancient path,
Black hours begin their journeyings.
Their star has risen in our hearts,
Empty thrones, abandoned fears,
Out on the hills their journey starts,
In dazzling darkness God appears.”

These words are from Judith Bingham’s choral anthem titled “Epiphany.”

It was, according to tradition, deep midwinter - a time of cold and scarcity, of short days and long nights - when the Wise Men journeyed far from home. “In the bleak midwinter,” as Christina Rossetti wrote, “frosty wind made moan. Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.” And the story of these pilgrims following yonder star that we all know from Matthew’s Gospel begins, also, in the darkness of the reign of King Herod. A king brutal enough, when he learns of the birth of the Messiah, to order the slaughter of children in an attempt to cut off and cut short any threat to his power by the star-announced, anointed king.

And so it is in a sort of multi-layered darkness where we find the Magi - in the dark of night, in deep midwinter, and in the palace of this bloody king - following the light of the star. The Wise Men. The Three Kings. They, through their practice of astrology or astronomy or some other art of celestial discernment have found this strange and wonderful star. And, knowing a thing or two about portent and prophecy, they’ve elected to follow it to find the one it promises to lead to. And that leads us to today and to the feast of the Epiphany.

The word “Epiphany” comes from the Greek word *epiphaneia* which means “manifestation” or “appearance.” And I deeply believe that God manifests in our lives. That God appears. That God sheds his supernatural grace through natural things - the beauty of trees and birdsong, our friends and family, our mundane everyday encounters with the world around us. Just as God appears to us in the bread and wine at the altar or in the beauty of this music and in this stone and glass, in our days we all encounter our own

“stars”, heavenly signs in the world pointing to God. But we, like the Wise Men, need to have the eyes to see them. The Wise Men knew the importance of the star because they were both paying attention for it and knew what to look for.

Jesuit Walter Burghardt once called prayer a “long, loving look at the Real.” The spiritual life, as I’ve experienced it anyway, is often about exactly this: being attentive to where God’s grace and Spirit may be manifesting, appearing in our midst. And to see these appearances, as grace, as gift, as holy. We must decide to try to see the love and goodness and beauty that we encounter as signs of God, as windows into eternity, and not just more of the randomness of life. To interpret the events of our days, the encounters in them, through the lenses of faith, of wonder and awe, love and contemplation.

And then we must decide whether, like the Wise Men, we will follow the “stars” in our lives, God’s holy light shining through ordinary things. Or whether, like Herod, we choose to resist them. To prefer our own thrones, our sins and selfishnesses, our petty power.

But, if we do follow the “stars” in our lives with attention and the willingness to see, we arrive like the Wise Men did at the incarnation. At Jesus. The Word made flesh. God made manifest. We don’t have gold or frankincense or myrrh to offer him. But we can, as Christina Rossetti writes, give our hearts.

Some nights I can’t sleep. I lie awake in the early morning hours. I turn this way to lie on my side to try and fall asleep. Then, that clearly not working, I turn the other way to lie on my back or my stomach. I move the pillows around; reshuffling them to try and achieve that One Perfect Position that will magically enable me to pass out. But it’s no use. Usually my brain is spinning frantically and it’s keeping my body awake. There’s some unanswered question, some unresolved worry that holds me in its grasp, shaking me as I try and rest. Perhaps it’s a relationship issue with somebody, a word spoken I wish I could take back or a big project or tough conversation coming up at work or a sermon that needs to be finished. And so I lie there in the dark - confused, anxious, afraid, remorseful, uncertain, distracted. Restless. Ultimately restless.

One of my favorite poems is this one by Wendell Berry,

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord” Saint Augustine famously wrote, “and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” It starts with the star; as it did with the Magi. With the epiphinaea, the light of the incarnate God shining through the things of this world. What Berry calls “the grace of the world.” Waiting like “the day-blind stars...with their light.”

There’s a bedtime prayer that my Mom used to pray with my brother and me when we were kids. It is my prayer on this Epiphany Day for myself and for all of you.

May we have eyes that see, ears that hear, hearts that love and hands that are willing to serve. Amen.