

Karen Hollis  
Sermon – Matthew 2:1-12  
January 6, 2019 Epiphany

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning. Bless us with the eyes to see and ears to hear your gifts to us. Amen.

Well, we did it – we survived a power outage, family visits, Christmas festivities, though I think a lot of us let go of many expectations and traditions that we normally do every year. For me, having the rare experience of celebrating Christmas without my family, I spent some time with memories of past Christmases and traditions my family practiced for years. Maybe you too have some traditions you're cherishing as we bring this Christmas season to a close. Perhaps you can trace some traditions back to ethnic family heritage. My paternal grandmother would make the same meal for Christmas her Polish mother made every year. That menu immediately speaks Christmas to me. After dinner gram would bring out the oplatik – a large rectangular wafer, similar to a communion wafer, drizzled with honey. She would hand it to my grandfather, who in the Polish tradition, would go around the table from youngest to oldest, breaking off a piece and offering it to us with a blessing of health and happiness in the new year. I had forgotten all about this until someone posted the tradition on facebook and it all came flooding back to me.

Depending on where you are around the world, Epiphany celebrations can be as important or even more important to the culture than Christmas. In Spain, on the evening of January 5, children write letters to the wise men and some leave shoes by the door, along with hay and water for the camels. In the morning, they rush to the door to see if the camels have received their gifts on their way to Bethlehem. They also hope to see those shoes filled with gifts from the wise men. There is also a wide-spread tradition of eating epiphany cakes, even on Gabriola, I understand: the cake might be ring shaped, a golden colour, filled with fruit, containing an almond, a coin, or it can be covered with glaze, depending on where you are in the world.

Jesus' birth is so important to us around the world, that we celebrate not only the event itself, but the way the news became manifest in the world. Epiphany is translated from the Greek as revelation or manifestation, a physical marker of a new outpouring of heavenly light, and Matthew tells the story of that light's appearance in a way that emphasizes that the message is for everyone and everyone is invited to participate in what God is doing.

The wise ones are not from Judea; they are not Jewish, and nowhere does it say there are three of them. They are Gentile astrologers, likely from Babylon, the seat of astrology at the time.<sup>1</sup> They see a notable astronomical event – while the astronomer in me would love to sit and dwell on what that event could be, it wouldn't get us any closer to the gospel message – so they see an astronomical event and interpret it as the birth of a ruler for the Jews. The event speaks to them in the language of their vocation and they are moved enough by this event to travel in search of the child. So they put together a caravan of wise ones, perhaps family, servants, and supplies, and set out on a journey that may have taken months, with one purpose, to acknowledge the presence of a new king and to bow down and worship him. The star speaks their language and they follow it to find a truth that is for them, Gentiles, as much as it is for the Jews who are waiting for it.

Herod the Great is . . . alarmed at the news of the birth of a child king . . . Herod is after all puffs himself up as the King of the Jews. So Herod calls on the Sanhedrin, which is like the Supreme Court of Judaism. They hear court cases and convene festivals, among other things. Upon hearing this news, Herod calls on their authority for information about the birth of such a King of the Jews . . . and doesn't like their answer: the king is to be born "in Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" The Gentiles see the sign that the child had been born - it was written in their language - and the Sanhedrin know who the child is and where to find him, because that is written in their language. I love this – it is a collaboration of the gifts

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<sup>1</sup> FOW volume 1 year C, 215

and wisdom from two different traditions that puts together the full picture of what has taken place. The message is for all of us and it takes all of us to understand it

The difference between Herod and the wise ones' response to the news couldn't be more pronounced. While the wise ones uproot their lives so they can pay homage to the child king, Herod is lazy, scheming, secretive, his heart is closed and he is afraid.

The wise ones go with hearts wide open, curiosity, reverence, awe and wonder as they approach the house where Mary and Joseph are staying. They bring gifts from their culture that would have been appropriate for the occasion, making themselves symbols for Christians of gratitude and generosity.

The difference between the two responses sparks the question that goes beyond who the message is for, to what kind of disciple do you want to become in the light of Jesus' birth? How is God calling you to manifest Christ in the world?

On Christmas eve I did a little exercise with the kids – I took 2 candles – one representing the light of Christ and the other representing our own authentic lights. Sometimes we forget that we have a unique and special light to share with the world and that light might dim or go out. Not only does Christ's light never go out, he reminds us who we are and how we have a purpose in the world. If you blow out a candle it sends up a stream of smoke – if you connect that stream of smoke to a lit flame, the flame will travel down the smoke to the wick and relight the candle. We can see it as a kind of metaphor for discipleship. When we stick close to Jesus – and there are any number of ways to do that – it logically follows that it is easier to remember who we are and to listen for what is emerging with God. When we are close to God, it is easier to connect with what God is trying to manifest in the world.

I love this idea of manifesting: giving body and voice to something Christ centered that is emerging in the world. It gets me excited and I want to be a part of it! The world is so much in need of healing and I also think God and all of God's helpers and messengers are working like crazy to help us bring resources and wisdom and healing into the world. I don't think it's something that we can really understand, but I like to think that in this season we are renewed with this idea that God is putting out

there things that are waiting to be known – they are things like specific expressions of wholeness and healing and love. We are disciples, and as such are called to participate in this work and so we are invited to remain close to the source of light so that we can respond where we are called. Thanks be to God.