

Sermon for January 6, 2019
Day of Epiphany
“Knowing God: Epiphany”

Matthew 2:1-12

I like the wise men. We call them wise men, kings, or magi. But in the Greek they are *magoi*. Magoi were probably Persians. Persia Magoi were learned scholars. They had studied the knowledge amassed by the Persian Empire, so they were wise men. They were also often advisors to Kings and were often given authority to manage Kingdoms, so they were often called kings. They may have known of the writings of Jewish prophets telling of the coming of a great king anointed by God, a Messiah. When the Jews were taken off into captivity the writings of the Old Testament Prophets may have ended up in the libraries of the Persians.

But more importantly the Magi were not Jewish, they were Gentile. They may have practiced a study of the stars that was closer to Astrology, as in horoscopes and such, than to the scientific study of Astronomy. But they were learned enough to know the positions of the stars in the sky. They were observant enough to notice a new star when it appeared. And they were wise enough to know that it was a sign from God of a new king. And they had faith enough to embark on a long journey based on this sign in the heavens.

We call this event “Epiphany.” An epiphany is a realization of God. It is a spiritual V8 moment. It is when the pieces come together and you discern the presence or character of God. Years of scholarly study and observation came together for the wise men and they perceived God and even worshiped the Son of God; God come in the flesh. So during this season of Epiphany and the Sundays following, my sermons will focus on “Knowing God.”

So what does this story tell us about knowing God? First it tells us that God is actively making God’s self known. Often we fail to recognize God, not because God is silent or in hiding, but because we are not listening and looking for God. The psalms say that the heavens declare the glory of God.(Psalm 19:1) Paul said that through nature God has been revealing God’s self to all humanity since the beginning of time. (Romans 1:20, 2:14-15)

God is seeking us, but are we looking, and where should we look? Many would say we should look to scripture. But the Bible is not the only way God is revealed to us. The Magi may have looked to scriptures, but they also looked at other things. Some Christians believe that scripture should be our only source of knowledge; this is called sola scriptura. In Methodism we speak of four sources of knowledge of God; often it is called the Wesleyan quadrilateral.

These four sources are: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Scripture is the books of the Bible, the record of God’s people and prophets. The second source, Tradition, is not local traditions of a particular community, but the broader deeper traditions of the church. Christians in other times and places have faced the same

issues we do. What answers did they find and pass on in the traditions of the church? The third source is reason. God gave us brains and the ability to use them. We should reason through our understandings of God. We should use our brains as we interpret and apply scripture and tradition. The last is experience. We have an experience of God. We can know the character and nature of God from our experience of life and of God. John Wesley did not invent this scheme. The idea of looking to scripture, tradition, and reason as sources of knowledge of God had been around for a long time. Wesley's improvement was the role of personal experience. Of these four sources Scripture is first. It is the starting point. Methodists may not believe in "scripture only" *sola scriptura*, but we do believe in "scripture first," *prima scriptura*.

The first thing we learn from the visit of the Magi is that God is revealing God's self in many different ways. The second thing we learn is that God is revealed to any and all who are open to seeing God not just Christians and Jews. The Magi were not Jews. They may have been Zoroastrians. They practiced a form of astrology that was outlawed by the laws of Moses. Yet it was to them and not the religious scholars in Jerusalem that the birth of the Messiah was made known.

God has been revealing God's self to all humanity throughout history. So we Christians should study the teachings of other religions. First of all it helps us understand the practitioners of those other religions so that we can better love and respect them as our neighbors. But those other points of view can help us know God better. I am not saying that we should believe everything in every other religion. That would be impossible. But that we should seek to grow in our knowledge of God by understanding their differing perspectives.

This goes for other Christians too. Too often we label Christians as liberal or conservative, and then write all their ideas and understanding off without hearing them. Instead of prejudging someone's ideas, maybe we should realize that God is revealing God's self to fundamentalists and charismatics and liberals, Catholics and Protestants and Orthodox alike! Yes, we should use reason in our studies of other perspectives and religions. We should question what they mean and be discerning consumers of the ideas of the world. But first we should listen open mindedly.

Learned wise men from the east came seeking the king anointed by God. Many in our world are seeking God. And God is seeking to be known by us. We need to open our ears, our eyes, and our minds to know God. That's what the Wise Men did! They opened their eyes to see the light of a star and they opened their minds to consider the teachings of the prophets of a conquered people.

"Seek and ye shall find." And when you have had your epiphany, then respond in faith. Follow the light of the star that God shows to you. No matter how far the journey takes you.

Then, when you reach the source of that light, kneel in homage. Open the treasure chests of your hearts. And give yourself as a gift to God.