



SERMONS THAT WORK

The Feast of the Epiphany Year B

God Is the Seeker

[RCL] Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

We celebrate today the great “Aha” moment when the Magi who journeyed from the east discover at the end of their quest not a prince born in a palace, but the infant Jesus born in a cave that had been used as a stable. The Magi are astrologers, who watch the heavens for signs of momentous earthly events. These are not astronomers who study the stars and planets for scientific data alone, but astrologers, not unlike people who create horoscopes today. Astrology was a forbidden means of divination for the Jews.

What the Magi reveal is that there was an air of expectation so palpable that anyone with eyes could see something momentous was about to happen. Let’s step aside from the Bible for a moment and see what else was being written around the time of Jesus’ birth. In the year 37 BCE, the poet Virgil wrote his Fourth Eclogue, a beautifully written poem about the immanent expectation of a man sent down from heaven whose birth would inaugurate a new age. Two Roman historians, Tacitus and Suetonius, wrote of the expectation of a world leader to arise out of Judea [Tacitus Ann. 5.13 and Suetonius Bell. 3.399-408; 6:310-15].

It was also a common expectation of the day that a sign from the heavens would accompany such a momentous event. There were plenty of impressive portents from which to choose. Jesus was likely born in what we would now call 4 BCE. Seven years before Jesus’ birth, Halley’s Comet made its circuit through our skies. Three years before Jesus’ birth, Jupiter and Saturn were in alignment three times. The planet Jupiter signified a king while Saturn was routinely associated with the Jews. This would have fueled Herod’s insecurity and local political and religious speculation. Finally, a year before Jesus’ birth, Chinese astronomers recorded sighting a supernova, a bright light suddenly appearing in the night sky.

What all of this tells us is that, independent of the Bible, we can read of a relatively common expectation at the turn of the era that momentous change was coming. Furthermore, that change was expected to be noted with signs in the heavens.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has always taught that God can be known through creation. This revelation through the creation is no simplistic natural theology, but the knowledge we gain of God through the creation alone is incomplete and sometimes confusing in and of itself. We come to see that though one can reliably come to know of God through the creation, we do not come to know God in fullness through the creation alone.

In theological terms, what we are discussing is revelation. Unless God chose to reveal God's own self to us, we would know nothing of God. But, because God decided to be made known, we can and do learn of God through the general revelation of creation and other forms of specific revelation. Just as you may discern something of the artist through her painting or his sculpture, one can learn of God through the creation. The theoretical physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne put it this way in his book *Science and Creation*,

“We are so familiar with the fact that we can understand the world that most of the time we take it for granted. It is what makes science possible. Yet it could have been otherwise. The universe might have been a disorderly chaos rather than an orderly cosmos. Or it might have had rationality which was inaccessible to us.”

The universe was created with an order that humans can study and somewhat comprehend. We were created with the ability to understand and a common component of human self-understanding through the ages and around the world has been a belief in God. This belief in something greater than ourselves is such a universal human experience that many find that awareness of God alone to be proof of God's existence. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that this universal human idea of God could be nothing more than a universal projection of our minds to fill a need in our lives. This is the Marxist worldview, that religion is the opium of the masses. We just delude ourselves into belief.

Yet, this idea of revelation comes circling back around to tap on our shoulders. We do not know of God simply because we want there to be a God. We know of God because God reveals God's own self to us. In addition to the general revelation of God through creation, there is specific revelation. The general revelation of God through creation spoils any possible excuse we may have in saying that we never knew there is such a thing as God. Specific revelation is more direct.

Specific revelation includes dreams and visions God uses to get people's attention. Dreams like the ones which told Joseph of Jesus' birth. Dreams like the one which warned the Magi to return home without stopping to pay a courtesy call on Herod and the one that warned Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt. Specific revelation also includes scripture. God's revelation is available to us through the word of God. We get a fuller picture of God through scripture that complements rather than contradicts the image of God we attain through the creation.

An important form of specific revelation comes through our own lives. We know God best through the ways in which God acts in our lives and the other ways in which God has acted in human history. As God is revealed in the way God acts in history, the Christian concept of revelation reaches its fullest expression in the person of Jesus. We get our best and clearest image of who God is and how God acts through Jesus' life and ministry, his death, and resurrection.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, “For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of the darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Whether they understood it at the outset of their journey or not, the Magi traveled to see the light of the Glory of God revealed in the face of the infant Jesus.

The Magi were seekers and even though their methods were unbiblical and perhaps anti-biblical, God honored their quest. God called out to the Magi from the heavens or they would have never found Jesus. God, not the Magi, initiated the Magi's quest. God guided them to their destination though the Magi never

knew where exactly where their journey would take them. Yet, the Magi played their part as they did not simply stay home admiring the star in the sky. They hit the road, enduring all the troubles of travel including having to go against the local king, Herod, when they neared their destination. Yet all of their actions came second. God initiated the journey.

We may think that we are spiritual seekers, we are the ones on a quest for God's presence. But that's not the way scripture presents the story. Scripture tells us that God is the seeker. God is revealing God's own self to you in the creation, in scripture, in your very life experience. We are asked only to open our eyes, to see, and then respond as the Magi did in coming to adore the one who made us and then entered human history to redeem us.

Open your eyes to how God is showing up in your life. God is seeking after you and me. Come let us adore him. Amen.

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