

Follow the Light.

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.
The Feast of the Epiphany, 2008.*

When I was a little kid, I used to go out in the mild southern night at this time of year and scan the skies, looking for the star of Bethlehem. I was sure it would look like the star on a Christmas card: hanging low in the sky, with rays streaming down from it towards the earth. I was smart enough to know that the star had shone a long time ago and had served its purpose, but I hoped that somehow, maybe, it would shine again – and I would get to see it. I would get to follow it.

We're all familiar with the song that goes, "*On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me twelve drummers drumming, eleven pipers piping, ten lords a-leaping, nine ladies dancing...etc., etc.*" Well, today is "the Twelfth Day of Christmas." In Merrie Olde England, Twelfth Night was an occasion for revelry the way New Year's Eve is today. It was party-time. The lords were really leaping and the ladies were really dancing. Epiphany itself was one of the great festivals of the Church. Nowadays, though, most people don't go to church on Epiphany – except every six years, when it falls on a Sunday. So the day doesn't get much attention.

The *magi* – the so-called Wise Men from the East – are the main actors in Matthew's Epiphany story. They weren't kings. That idea came from a medieval misunderstanding of the Bible. And there may have been three, or seven or any number. Matthew only says that they brought three kinds of gifts to give the Newborn King, but not how many there were who brought them. We know that the *magi* were astrologers, who saw significance in the conjunctions of certain planets in particular constellations in the night sky. They saw such a conjunction – "a new star" – in the sky and identified it as a sign from God, a sign that a new king had been born in Judea. So they came from their homes – which were probably in Persia – to Jerusalem. And they were sent from Jerusalem out to Bethlehem, where they found the baby Jesus and worshiped him, offering gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, the Bible says, when the time had come for them to return home, an angel warned them not to go back to see Herod again, but instead to go back to their homes "by another road."

I want to point out four things from the story of the Wise Men that I believe offer guidance for us in our time. **First: the Wise Men were teachable; they were "seekers."** The *magi* were important people in their native land. Neighbors came to them to get help with personal problems and looked to them for direction in religion, business, and even romance. But although they were wise leaders and very learned, they were conscious that they didn't already "know it all." There was *more* to life and the mysteries of the universe than they already comprehended. When the new star appeared, there were no doubt others who saw it, but as far as we know only these few *followed* it. The Wise Men were brave enough to follow the new star. Truly wise people know when to lead and when to follow.

Humility is a virtue. Arrogance is a flaw. Nobody, *nobody* is so wise, experienced, or brilliant that he (or she) can't learn something new. The number one lesson for us from the Wise Men is *to stay teachable*. Jesus told his disciples that they needed to "become like little children." The universally true thing about little children is that they all have a lot to learn! So do we.

The story of the Wise Men also tells us that God has more to reveal than we've already seen. I'm a pretty conservative person myself, especially in matters of faith. I'm a student of history and I value tradition in the family, in the church, and in the nation. But I believe that what God said to the prophet Isaiah five hundred years before Christ is still valid today. God said, "*Forget about what's happened; don't keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new. It's bursting out! Don't you see it?*" (THE MESSAGE, Isa. 43:18-19)

We want to have eyes to see the new things God is doing in our time and the wisdom to know the difference between new things *God* is doing and new things that are merely human novelties. The Wise Men in Matthew's story were learned men, but they were teachable too. They saw a "new star" and it told them that God was doing something new. They wanted to be part of it.

Here's the second aspect of this story that can guide us: The Wise Men followed the light. Jesus is the Light of the World. The main symbol of the Feast of the Epiphany is *light*. That's why we have all the candles down the church aisle this morning, just like we did on Christmas. When John wrote about the birth of Jesus in his gospel, he said, "*The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world.*" At the end of this service, we're going to sing: "*As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold; as with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright; so, most gracious Lord, may we evermore be led to thee.*" The light of the wonderful star guided the Wise Men to Jesus, and the light of Jesus is still shining in the dark night of our world, just as it has been shining since he was born in Bethlehem ages ago. The question is: *Where do we see his light shining today?* Like the Wise Men who found the newborn King not in Herod's palace but in a humble house in Bethlehem, so we have to be prepared to find the light of Christ shining in an unexpected place.

Where is the light of Christ shining for you? Look in the places you least expect! Is it in discovering contemplative prayer? Is it in giving yourself to serve the poor? Is it in a call to ordained ministry as a deacon or priest? Is it in loving people who have only been treated as outcasts, rejects, by society? Or, is it in the most unexpected place of all: right in your own home and your own family, where you spend most of your life? It's your job to discern where the light of Christ is shining for you, so keep your eyes open to see it. —It's there!

The third aspect of the story to think about is this: When the Wise Men found the One who was the object of their search, they worshiped Him. The Wise Men offered the newborn King gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These were mystical gifts which some people say were symbols of the office of the *magi*, elements essential to the rituals of their exotic priesthood. This kind of gift-giving tells us that when we come to Christ, the True Light, the object of our life-long search, the fundamental imperative for us is *worship*. Authentic worship, whatever shape it takes, is the recognition of God's ultimate value, God's "worth." *Our* worship (and I'm not just talking about what we do in church on Sunday) – if it really is worship – has to focus on giving Christ the most precious gifts we can offer: our true selves, our hearts and minds, our natural endowments and skills. True worship entails the offering of a sacrifice, a costly gift, joyfully given.

The final thing we learn from the Epiphany gospel is this: After the Wise Men had found Christ and worshiped him, they returned to their homes "by another road." If we're teachable, like the Wise Men were... If we, like them, are able to see the new thing that God is doing in our lives and in his world... If we come to Christ, the True Light, and offer our whole being to him in love... then *we're going to be CHANGED*. Real worship always changes us. And if we're truly changed by our experience of Christ, then we're going to find ourselves taking "another road," a new road, a new way of moving forward with our lives. We're not going to be satisfied with things they way they used to be before we offered ourselves to Christ. We're not going to be content to stay in our comfortable rut, whatever it might have been —not if we have found Him and truly worshiped Him. We're going to "go back home by another road."

We'll go back to our jobs, our families and friends, and the occupations of daily life on a new and different path. This fresh path will vary somewhat for each of us. That's only natural. But our various personal paths will have this much in common: they will all be new to us, and on each of them the True Light of Christ will be shining to show the way forward. Follow that Light!