

Epiphany 2020 – Treasure Hunt

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Prayer of Illumination

God of light and life,
open our eyes as well as our ears,
so that we may not only hear your Word preached today
but then see your Word lived out in our lives and in your world,
through Christ, our Lord, the light of the world. Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-13

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "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.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON: Epiphany 2020 – Treasure Hunt

Epiphany marks the traditional day that the church celebrates the “magi” arriving at their destination. The “magi” are rather mysterious characters who’ve been variously identified as “kings,” “wise men,” Zoroastrian priests, and astrological scholars.

Matthew identifies them simply as “magi”—recognized scholars who claimed to have special abilities to interpret dreams and predict futures. Matthew does not specify that there were only three—we guess there were three because of the three gifts for the baby Jesus. But any group bringing treasures on long journeys would likely have been accompanied by an entourage of servants, guards, animals, and caretakers. And if these magi were, in fact, Zoroastrian priests, that means that some of these “wise men” might very well have been women, since women also served as priests in that tradition.

What Matthew’s text does tell us for certain is that these stargazers had witnessed the rising of a new “star” (was it a supernova? a comet?) and had, as their tradition taught, associated this sighting with the birth of a new “king of the Jews.” This is another messianic title, an identity, the child has been born with. The magi wish to welcome this “king” and pay him “homage” as soon as possible.

Although they were bearing treasures, the magi themselves were on a “treasure hunt.” And every treasure hunt needs clues and counsel. They’d observed the rising of the star, but needed specifics to get there. They asked for help from King Herod, unaware of how threatened and interested he was in this new king. Not surprisingly, Herod hustles together all the priests and scribes, the ones learned in scripture, to find directions for these scholars on their quest. The answer they gave came from a combination of texts:

- Micah 5:2 identifies “Bethlehem,” as the hometown of King David.
- 2 Samuel 5:2 provides the last line which emphasizes the “shepherding” character of this new ruler.

While Herod’s priests and scribes provided the “coordinates” for the magi’s search, the star itself then acted as their personal GPS as they followed its course to the birthplace of the baby Jesus.

Upon their arrival, the magi are “overwhelmed with joy,” an emotion in sharp contrast to the response of Herod and all of Jerusalem who were “frightened” by the news of this birth but couldn’t be bothered to investigate the threat themselves.

- What emotions does the birth of Christ elicit in us?
- Do we take a closer look, or do we continue on our merry way?

The travelers immediately fulfill their reasons for the trip. They pay “homage” to the baby king by offering him an assortment of remarkable gifts they have brought in their “treasure chests.” You might not think you have much experience with “treasure chests,” but the Greek term here for treasure chests is “*thesaurus*.” If you’ve ever been writing a paper and struggling for just the

right word, you have probably delved into a “thesaurus” for help. “Thesaurus” literally means a “treasure chest” of words.

In this week’s epistle text from his letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of “the boundless riches of Christ” (vs. 8). The gifts of the magi might have been designated for Jesus, but Jesus in his generosity made us all inheritors of the boundless riches of Christ—that of forgiveness and love.

Epiphany is the church’s celebration of great gifts. But the greatest gift did not come out of the “treasure chests” that the magi brought to the baby Jesus. The greatest gift was the presence of Jesus in this world, for our sake, to save us from our sins, and for making it possible for us to reconnect in a right relationship with our God and Creator. This is just the gift we need—perfectly created for us.

The “epiphany” of God is that God wants to open up God’s treasure chest in which are found boundless riches for a fulfilled life. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the first century equivalent of a black card, a winning multi-million dollar lottery ticket, and a thousand shares of Amazon.

- The gifts of the magi—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—were a promise of abundance to one child.
- The gift of Jesus the Christ was the promise of boundless riches for each and every child of God.

These “riches” are not measured in dollars, or real estate, or expensive “toys.”

- Gold shines—but if it’s locked away, hoarded, and worshiped it doesn’t do a bit of good. But, no doubt about it, gold, the brightness of gold, can open up new pathways and possibilities for people who are struggling to find food and shelter, education, and escape from hopelessness.
- Frankincense “smells”—but it smells sweet. It is the scent of home and comfort, of love and caring. Frankincense has a rich aroma but we can savor its smell in the morning cup of coffee we enjoy with a spouse or close friend. Frankincense is there in the smell of a baby we cuddle and kiss. Frankincense is the essence of love and companionship and community.
- Myrrh is a spice. It preserved and persevered even in the presence of death. The gift of “spice” is the gift of strength to persevere and trust in God’s provision.

A man was driving on a country lane when he noticed a chicken running ahead of him. He glanced at his speedometer: 50 miles per hour. But the chicken was outrunning the car. The driver increased his speed to 60 miles per hour, then 70, and still the chicken ran ahead of the car. Suddenly the chicken took a right turn onto a small farm and disappeared behind the farmhouse. The man was so intrigued by the chicken’s performance that he parked his car and knocked on the farmhouse door.

When the owner appeared, the man said to the farmer excitedly, *"Sir, do you know you have a chicken that can run over 70 mph?"*

The farmer replied, *"Oh, you must mean our three-legged chicken. He's really fast. You see, I live here with my wife and son. And when it comes to fried chicken, each of us loves the drumstick. So we decided to breed three-legged chickens."*

"That's amazing," said the man. *"How has it worked out? How does a three-legged chicken taste?"*

To which the farmer replied, *"I don't know. We haven't caught him yet!"*

We live in a world of three-legged chickens, a world where people are pursuing three-legged chickens. We have a variety of three-legged chickens. One variety is "security" or "control." Another three-legged chicken is called fame. Another is called "pleasure" or "sensuality." Another three-legged chicken is called wealth.

If your quest in life, your dream for this new decade, is for anything other than The Way, The Truth, and The Life, then you're just running after three-legged chickens.

Are you hunting down celebrity status, 1% status, or just want to be well-liked by everybody? That's your three-legged chicken. And you'll never catch up to it.

Let Jesus be your fortune. Let Jesus be your fame. Let Jesus be your dream for 2020. Jesus is our holy thesaurus. The manger holds God's perfect word made flesh. It is only in Him and in his "treasure chest" where the true "boundless riches" of life can be found. Jesus is life's real Treasure Hunt.

Amen.

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