

Kirk of St James
Sunday January 7th, 2018
Sermon “Stargazing”
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

I grew up in a rural part of Nova Scotia. There are no streetlights and our nearest neighbour is over a mile away. When you walk outside on a clear night and look up, the view is breathtaking. Thousands upon thousands of stars light up the sky. I often forget to look up and marvel at the view but, every once in a while it grabs my attention and makes me wonder at the vastness of it all. Perhaps you have felt something similar while camping or, travelling at night, or even stepping out your front door. My sister called me the night she returned to Manitoba because she had witnessed the fireball that lit up the sky a bright blue green and set the internet ablaze as people described what they had seen. It was such an incredible sight she wanted to share the experience. There is something captivating about the night sky. When I used to work at camp our time there always overlapped with the Perseids meteor shower. For one night during the camp when the sky was clear we would let everyone stay up an extra hour, we would each grab a blanket and we would sit out and watch the sky. There were always so many oohs, ahhs, and excited exclamations whenever we would see something streak across the sky. Perhaps because it is a reminder that the world is so much bigger than we can imagine. That we can lay there looking heavenward and wonder about the majesty of it all.

In biblical times it was much the same. N.T Wright had a wonderful description when we he said “The ancient world, innocent of streetlights, never forgot the night sky. Many people, particularly in the countries to the east of Palestine, had developed the study of the stars and planets to a fine art, giving each one very particular meaning. They believed, after all, that the whole world was a piece; that everything was interconnected, and when something important was happening on earth you could see it reflected in the heavens. Alternatively, a remarkable event among the stars and planets must mean, they thought, a remarkable event on earth.” There has been some discussion since that time as to what the Magi saw. Supernovas, Halley’s Comet, or planets in conjunction with each other have all been suggested but, we will never know for sure. What is important is that whatever they saw caused them to the leave the

comfort of home, pack gifts fit for a king, and then go search out the earthly counterparts of this heavenly event.

These 12 verses in Matthew hint at what is to come as the chief priests are put to shame, the mysterious Magi find the child they have been searching for, and Herod struggles to remain in control. These three sets of characters all reveal something important about the birth of the Christ child and those who surrounded him. One Presbyterian pastor in the states attributes the success of the Magi's quest to six essential things. The first was that the Magi had studied and knew the histories. They knew the past, they knew the prophecies, and as a result when something incredible occurred they recognized the signs. The second step to success was that they had studied but, were also keen observers of the world around them. If they had not studied and also remained aware of the world around them, Epiphany might well have been missed. I was thinking about this as I wrote up our weekly e-mail that goes out on Friday. I included the date that the annual reports are due in to the office. Last year I reminded everyone each week for a month about the reports and their due date. On the due date Amy came and asked for my report and I had forgotten to write it. I had been so busy reminding others I completely forgot my own responsibility. It is easy, when you are immersed in something to forget to look beyond your immediate circumstance. It would have been incredibly easy for the magi to have been so wrapped up in their study of the stars that they forgot to actually look up at the night sky and see them.

The third part of their success was that they were willing to take a risk and set out on a new journey. Not only did they see it, recognize it, but they also let it motivate them. It was possible that after seeing such an event that they shrugged their shoulders and went back to work. Instead they packed up their books and belongings and set out in a new direction. The fourth aspect that is important to remember is that they asked for directions when they were unsure. When they arrived in Nazareth they began to ask people where the child was because, surely they too had seen the signs. They were not afraid to ask people for help and direction as they came near the end of their search. The fifth part of the magi story is that they responded with all that they had, and all they could give. When they meet the child with his family they

offered him the best of themselves. The last part of their story is that when their hopes had been realized, and the time came to return home they still remained vigilant and open. When they have a dream telling them to go home by another route they listened. From beginning to end these Magi demonstrate a way of living that inspires us as Christians today. To study, be aware, take risks, ask for help when needed, to give the best we can, and remain open to possibilities we may not even be aware of yet.

The outcome of not doing these things can be seen in both the chief priests and scribes, and also in King Herod. In the gospel of Matthew he juxtaposes the Magi over against King Herod's scholars and priests. The scripture experts with the scrolls, the wealth of the palace, and all the learning opportunities you could hope for are absolutely flabbergasted when the Magi show up asking questions. King Herod is so shocked by the news he gathers all his top people together and questions them. Who knows how they missed the signs. Perhaps they were studying so hard they forgot about the world around them. Perhaps they thought they were nice stories but, were not expecting them to come to life. Perhaps they saw the signs but did not act. For whatever reason they missed this long prophesied event, and have no idea what to do next.

King Herod on the other hand considered himself at the top of his game—nothing was going to get by him. He was paying the top minds in the country to be aware of what was going on around him. Herod wanted more, and “his appetite for power left him vulnerable in his leadership, relationships, and life.” So imagine that a day comes when Herod who thinks he knows everything, now hears about a child who was born that may challenge his power. Not only that but, this had happened some time ago. How did they miss this? A Christian band called Casting Crowns has a Christmas album and on it is a song called *While You Were Sleeping* and I found the words appropriate for this moment. They say

Oh little town of Bethlehem
 Looks like another silent night
 Above your deep and dreamless sleep
 A giant star lights up the sky
 And while you're lying in the dark
 There shines an everlasting light
 For the King has left his throne
 And is sleeping in a manger tonight

Oh Bethlehem, what you have missed while you were sleeping
For God became a man
And stepped into your world today
Oh Bethlehem, you will go down in history
As a city with no room for its King
While you were sleeping

Herod is now in a panic. They have missed something major and it may cost him his kingship. He is furious and his extreme actions after the fact speak to this. Herod takes the story of the magi so seriously he has every child two and under killed. Herod was unable to hear the good news of the birth of Christ. He let his need for power, and fear of losing control win out over the promises of the ancient prophecies. Herod's son will eventually be one of the ones Jesus is sent to before he is crucified.

The story of epiphany is an important one in our Christian lives. Capital "E" Epiphany refers to the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Small "e" epiphany is what Paul describes in Ephesians today. It is the realization of Christ's place in our lives. Today in Matthew each person responds to the birth of Christ differently but, the magi themselves remind us of what our response should look like. We recognize, respond, act, and remain open to Christ's presence in our lives. This Sunday of epiphany may Christ's love strike our hearts in new ways. In areas where we have closed ourselves off may we find our way back. In places where we are lost may we find friends to help us along the road. N.T Wright concludes his thoughts on Epiphany with the following words "Listen to the whole story, Matthew is saying...and then come to Christ by whatever route you can, and with the best gifts you can find. May we all be inspired by both the tenacity, and the journey that the Magi undertake. May we bring the best of who we are and what we have to give. May we each find a moment to look up at the stars this week and take a moment to ponder those wondrous events that happened hundreds of years ago.