

Sermon January 4, 2015

by Sheila Maissan

Today we celebrate Epiphany. The Church uses a lot of big words to try to convey our limited understanding of God. Epiphany is a Greek word, it's about God showing humans God's very nature. You can call a major aha! moment an epiphany - like I finally got it.

At Epiphany we celebrate the coming of the Magi. They're not Jewish. They followed a star for probably hundreds of miles, they searched, they asked around, and finally they saw God with their own eyes. They looked at a little a baby and they recognised God.

We are so used to the Christmas story we sometimes overlook what an unlikely motley crowd God chose to hear the good news, to be shown God incarnate, God in the flesh. Just a little human baby but in him, as Paul says, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. (Colossians 1:19)

As Bev said on Christmas Eve, the Glory of the Lord was supposed to shine on important people at specific times. The Glory of the Lord covered Mt. Sinai when Moses went up to get the ten commandments. It filled the sanctuary when Solomon dedicated the new built temple. It shone in Daniel's dreams and Isaiah's visions, as in our call to worship. After that – quite a gap. The Glory had departed from Israel. (1 Sam 3:22)

Then God got a plan, a plan about a baby, a special baby. Who gets told about it? The mother's a good start. And the father needs to get on board. So God sends an angel to check it out with them.

Then her cousin Elizabeth knows - good idea, young girl needs older, experienced woman to talk to. We are not told how Mary's own family feel about all this.

And then who gets told? A bunch of shepherds. They live out in the fields, they can't be clean, physically or ritually. As anyone who ever had livestock, or even a dog, knows ,you can't ever take a complete day off. Shepherds cannot observe the Sabbath, can't attend the temple. They're not high on the social ladder. There's nothing to indicate that they're particularly kind or devout. But the Glory of the Lord shines on them.

And today we celebrate the arrival of the Magi. Traditionally there are three but we don't know. They must have been educated men with time and interest to study the stars. Kings? Unlikely, but wealthy men definitely. Only the rich could afford to travel. Only the rich could bring gifts like that.

But why would God choose a bunch of far-off foreigners?

Certainly God knew better than to try to interest the Judean king. Herod would probably have arrived in haste all right but not to worship.

But surely – surely – there must have been some important priests or rich local Jews God could have announced this to? Weren't there? Jerusalem wasn't far away and it was a decent-sized city. Quite a variety of races and outlooks were part of the Jewish faith and many of them visited Jerusalem. Was there no one there ready to celebrate the new born Messiah?

If God wanted non-Jews, well, we hear about a few righteous Romans. The Phoenician woman who answered Jesus back. The Samaritan woman who found faith when Jesus asked her for water at the well.

So why would God send the guiding star to these foreigners from the east?

Or did God send the star to shine on all people but only those foreigners noticed?

We don't look up much, do we? We don't always notice what's happening around us. And sometimes the very important things happen slowly, they get lost in the everyday busyness that we do have to do. Sometimes we only realise what was happening when we look back.

Parents often find that – we ask ourselves, when did they grow up? I didn't notice.

Speaking of which - I must have read this many times but only just noticed this verse in Ephesians when Christopher and I were preparing for today.

Paul says in Ephesians that he is called:

to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;

(3:10) so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.

The wisdom of God ***in its rich variety***. Other translations talk of the "manifold wisdom of God". Not the car exhaust kind. Manifold - much-variegated: many-sided : multi-dimensional. Wisdom in all its different forms: wisdom in all its variety: the complex wisdom: God's infinite and boundless wisdom.

Beauty is not found in just one lovely colour. Music is not found in just one pure note. The wisdom of God is not found in just one statement or creed, no matter how profound.

I think Paul is saying that it is the job of the church – our job - to make known the hugely wide and rich variety of ways that show God's wisdom, God's presence, God at work.

God is to be found in many places.

Bev's said many times, Scripture does not speak with one voice. And humans do not hear with one ear, as it were. Sometimes what speaks volumes to one person means nothing to another. Music that inspires me may jar with you. And vice versa.

Does silence speak to you? Or does it make you uneasy?

Do you find God in nature? Or in a good book?

It's all OK. We're all different and that's good.

I was talking to a friend the other day, who said that she came here to worship because we welcomed everyone as God's children. We didn't exclude people who lived differently or thought differently or believed differently or weren't sure if they believed at all.

I was really proud – and humbled – to hear her say that.

This is a new year. We don't know what it will hold. Lots possibilities. We just sang, "Behold, I make all things new, beginning with you, and starting from today."

And there will very likely be some of the same old, same old. That's part of life too.

But lets try to be open to epiphanies. Open to seeing God in a huge variety of ways, in a huge variety of circumstances and people.

And open to showing others God at work, in us and around us, in what we do, in what we say, as a church and as individual people.

The star still shines. Let's look up.

There is still light in the darkness. Let's live in the light.

God go with you.