

“Searching Diligently”

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Reading: Isaiah 60.1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2.1-12

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.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

**[a splendid picture of the unwrapping of exotic gifts,
as they unveiled their offerings]**

Let me start with a personal revelation concerning the sermon title – I have a hangup about the word diligent. Based on a terrifying encounter with a piano teacher in 1960, the concept of diligence bears an iconic significance for me – it carries the freight of all one ought to be and all one never is, all the missed opportunities and all the guilt-laden might-have-beens that we live with. Until I dredged up the courage to confess this private worry to a friend I didn't realize that actually almost everybody suffers from it. Maybe not the problem with the word diligence, but that quiet conviction that everything would be different if you tried harder. Nice to know you are not alone.

The problem is, though, that that piano teacher was right. The bitter truth is that without diligence, nobody gets very far. Some have talent, some have charm, some have gifts and privilege – but you have to put in the mileage. In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell says that it takes about ten thousand hours to become really skilled at something important. Whether it's computer programming, the playing of a musical instrument, or a sport, there is an almost spooky link between proficiency and ten thousand hours of practice. He doesn't apply it to the life of faith, but we could.

We see that when we look at today's reading. Our celebration of Epiphany, with its story of Magi travelling from afar to find a King, illustrates the principle. Based on the myriad of legends about them, the stories of years of preparation and travel, we might imagine that it took the Magi about 10,000 hours to master their assignment.

We tend to use the word Epiphany to mean a sudden flash of insight or vision of divine truth – a moment when God appears, as it were, unsought. Most people can identify moments in their own lives when either a small glimmer of perception or a lightning bolt of truth has proven to be definitive. The sense of "I get it". Within the church year, Epiphany is a whole season of moments of clarity. That is why there is so much emphasis on light in the readings and hymns. The scripture passages each week Sunday from this one until Lent focus on moments when various people looked at Jesus and said, 'Oh, that's it. When I see Jesus, I see God'. We see his encounters and hear his teachings, as Matthew says over and over, 'Here it is'.

But what is interesting about today's story of the original Epiphany is not the bolt of lightning quality. Indeed, just the opposite. It's the 10,000 hours. Apparently, finding the king requires diligence! Even Herod knows this – Go search diligently, he advises them. We see that they have already studied for many years, checking the ancient manuscripts and prophecies against the evidence of the astronomical indications and the wheeling of the stars. In order to find him, they have had to leave home without a clear destination, and trek for months through vast empty wastelands and dangerous abandoned territory. Since they were tracking a star, we must assume they traveled in the dark of the cold desert nights. They study, they travel to a strange place, they proceed in the dark.

And then, just when it seems that their efforts will bear fruit, they become confused by their signs, and pause to ask for help. Their ostensible helper is a trickster figure, Herod the King, who wants only to exploit them for his own ends. Even so, they manage to elicit useful information from this untrustworthy source.

Then, at their destination, they discover that the treasure they have been seeking is not in any way similar to what they thought they were seeking. Not at all like a King. A baby in a poor household, obscure, unheralded.

So, if you take this whole story, it is not really much of a metaphor for the sudden flash of insight approach to spiritual searching. On the contrary, it depicts the journey of faith as quite a lot of work.

According to this story, we will need to begin by careful and patient study and reflection, trying to discern in the first place what it is we are looking for. It's a very basic question – what *are* we looking for, in a liberal Protestant church at the beginning of 2011? What do we think the objective of faith may be – is it to make us feel safe, or inspire us to good works, or connect us to our own past? What does it mean to say that this is the bread of life, and the cup of blessing? Is faith supposed to give us answers in a complex time or to help us enrich our questions? The Magi didn't just study the old books – they looked out at the night sky and strained to see new patterns emerging. What do we see when we look around us? How do we interpret the heavens, so to speak, how do we understand the way the world is moving? That's the task.

And could we set off in the dark, not knowing? And would we ask directions from someone we don't much like the look of? And would we be open to the possibility that our journey takes us to a place of great obscurity and lack of promise? I mean, you put in the first 9,500 hours and find that you've arrived at a stable?

Yet we are told that they were overwhelmed with joy. As we see in the ten thousand hour rule of Gladwell, there is some mysterious connection between diligence and joy. It was joy that spurred the Magi, and joy that met them. Joy that

wrapped the wonderful gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. May the same joy be woven into our journey, and bring us to Epiphany.

Let us pray:

Loving God,

The mystery of faith is as great now as it was for the Magi.

The journey is still long, and arduous.

Help us to search diligently.

Amen