

Scripture:

Psalm 72

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

“Because it’s good.”

An abbreviated version of the poem --- The Church Year by Ann Weems.

“The church is Advent.
The unwrapping of God’s greatest gift is near.
Advent --- coming.
God will take away the tinsel
and decorate our human hearts with hope
so that Christians can sit laughing in the rain,
knowing that the Lord is going to
shine upon their being.

For no matter how long the darkness,
God will send Light.
In spite of cursing and violence and the massacring of human
dignity,
we will dance in the streets of Bethlehem,
for He will be born!

The church is Epiphany.
We are the magi searching
resplendent in this world’s accoutrements
of knowledge and wealth and achievement.
But we search for something more.

And --- of all unlikely places ---
in a stable
the Deity appears.

The birthing of our Lord
bursts in upon our ordinary lives
like fireworks in the snow.
Only God would send a little baby King,
and we are on our knees,

where we are within reach of our full personhood.”

The church is Epiphany.

The church is Epiphany ---- like the Magi --- or Wise men ----- we follow the light of Christ ---- and then when we step into His presence --- we bow down and worship --- and we share the gifts God has blessed us so that they can be used for the Kingdom of God.

And the church is Epiphany ---- the people of God are Epiphany ---- simply because it's good ---- and right --- and faithful to be a people of the Epiphany.

We are not just people of the Epiphany ----- we are not just Christians so that when we die we go to be with God in heaven.

We are not just people of the Epiphany ----- we are not just Christians so that we can live forever.

We are not just people of the Epiphany ----- we are not just Christians so that we can have all of our sins forgiven ----- and be reconciled and made new in Jesus Christ.

We are not just people of faith so that we can get our individual sins forgiven and go to heaven.

That is a very self centered ----- me --- me --- me approach to faith.

Sally Lloyd-Jones --- in her introduction to her Storybook bible writes ----
“The Bible isn't mainly about you and what you should be doing. It's about God and what He has done.”

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The story of the Epiphany ----- the wise men coming to see Jesus --- the revelation to the whole world --- and not just some Israelites and shepherds - -- that the boy Jesus was Christ the Messiah --- is all about God and what He has done and is still doing.

The wise men travel to see Jesus because it's a good thing to do.

The wise men travel to see Jesus **not** because it's good for them ---- there is no real personal benefit to them ----- they travel because it is simply put --- a good thing to do --- a good and right thing to do.

They do as God leads them ---- not because the God who leads them is necessarily their understanding of the Divine.

They do as God leads them not necessarily because they will follow this boy born Jesus for the rest of their lives --- they do it because it is good.

Good as in right --- true --- faithful --- righteous --- according to God's will.

The wise men do as God so leads them --- first by the star and then by the Hebrew Scriptures --- Micah ---- because of God's goodness and not for any benefit of their own.

You know the phrase ----- "cui bono" ----- "Q wee bono" ---- or "who benefits" --- or more aptly put ---- what is the motive ---- why did someone or some group of people do a certain thing --- what was in it for them?

For today the "Q-wee bono" question is ----- who benefits from the wise men going to see the baby ---- what is the motive of the wise men in going to see the baby King of the Jews in Bethlehem?

The answer ----- the wise men certainly don't benefit personally from this visit ----- and ----- their motive seems elusive.

There must be more to the story --- but there isn't.

They do what they do because God led them to.

They are patiently and patently guided by God ----- God's goodness and nothing else ---- there is no ulterior motive or personal gain --- there is nothing in it for them.

A star in the sky --- and then a passage from Micah lead them to their goal.

They don't stumble on the Messiah --- they aren't on their way somewhere else and suddenly trip upon Jesus --- as if by accident.

Instead they search and follow with purpose ----- and they are directed each step of the way by God's divine direction.

They do what they do for the simple reason that it is good ---- it is right ---- it is God's will for them to go and follow and worship the baby Jesus.

Perhaps we might strive to be more like these wise traveling scholars or kings.

Perhaps we too might strive a little harder to go to Christ --- meet with Him more often ----- follow God's lead more diligently --- worship Him ----- and then respond with the presentation of gifts --- resources --- money --- time -- - talents.

In a certain sense the wise men --- are a perfect metaphor or guide --- as to what we as Christians ought to shoot for.

Follow God --- even if it means going far away to an uncertain place -- literally or metaphorically.

Follow God's lead ---- even if it means not knowing exactly where it is God is leading us --- have faith --- trust in Him and be courageous.

And of course the magi are men of exceptional faith and courage.

“Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”

King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote:

‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,
for a ruler will come from you

who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’”

Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!”

King Herod and the rest of Jerusalem are disturbed --- but not the wise men -- they just want to get on with things and get to Jesus.

The rest of the people in and around Bethlehem are disturbed --- but not them ----- and Herod --- more than just disturbed is threatened and becomes angry --- read on past our passage to see this anger.

But the Magi courageously --- and remember they are far from home --- in Roman occupied territory ---- the magi courageously come to this distant foreign occupied place to worship their new native King.

Fearlessly they follow as the star guides them --- and then once they're almost there they get guidance from the prophet Micah who said ---

“But you Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

So the prophet's words point them to Bethlehem --- and as they go --- the star appears once again and takes them right to where Jesus was --- stopping over the place where the child was.

They were fearless men --- following with a purpose and following without interruption.

They were on a mission --- to see Jesus and to bow down before Him --- and to present Him with valuable gifts --- and nothing was going to stop them or get in their way.

And of course after they arrive and give gifts --- we have verse 12.

“And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.” --- verse 12.

In other words ---- after meeting Jesus --- they are changed and go home by another route --- their life is altered.

This is a great story about faithful and wise men --- following God's lead courageously --- faithfully --- fearlessly --- doing the good thing --- doing what they do simply because it is right and good --- not because they are good --- and not even because it is good for them --- but simply because it is good.

But even more than this --- this is a story --- an event --- that is all about God leading --- pointing ---- guiding --- and changing.

The wise men search relentlessly for Jesus ----- and God leads them unflinchingly to Jesus.

And the purpose of their mission is simply doing a good thing ---- paying homage and worshipping this new born King.

There is no personal benefit in their mission ---- they do it because it is the will of God who leads and directs them without any benefit to themselves.

As beautiful as the wise men are ---- this is not primarily a story about faithful courageous human effort --- a band of wise man demonstrating what we might call Christian discipleship.

This is not a story about what is good for them --- or what we can learn from them even.

This is a story about what is good ----- who is good --- God.

Just as the Bible isn't mainly about us and what we should be doing.

This isn't a story about us and what we should be doing.

This story --- like all Bible stories is first and foremost about God and what He has done – and how blessed we are because of Him.

God has found a way to lead these inquisitive travelers to the Christ and changed their lives --- without the Roman authorities figuring it out or getting their hands on the baby first.

And even after the Roman authorities tell the wise men to tell them where the baby is after they find Him --- the wise men still have enough courage and faithfulness left ----- to protect the boy king and go home their own way without ever reporting back to Herod.

This is a remarkable story of God's leading --- God's choosing --- God's goodness --- and God's revelation.

At Epiphany God revealed to the whole of the world that this little baby wasn't just any baby.

At Christmas Mary and Joseph and a few shepherds know --- at Epiphany it's revealed to many more – Kings Romans --- inhabitants of Jerusalem --- all far and near.

It's an ----- “a-ha” moment ---- for the whole world ---- and not just the Israelites.

Their arrival signals the universal proclamation ----- that the little manger boy was in fact the long awaited Messiah.

God had acted and God had made His actions clear.

Even a band of wealthy foreign scholars --- wise men ---- people of influence --- who had absolutely nothing to gain in bowing down and worshipping this little foreign child ----- realize something special is happening here.

And so they shout ---- in deed ---

“This is the one.”

“Look over here ----- here He is.”

“He's here ---- it's all good.”

These are the cries of Epiphany ----

“This is the one.”

“Over here ----- under the star ---- here He is.”

Micah had written --- prophesized --- about 700 or so years earlier -----

““But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”

He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.”

The great Roman poet Virgil writes in his *Eclogues* --- about 30 or so years
before Christ was born.

“Foretold by Sibylline song, the crowning age
has arrived, the great cycle of the centuries
begins afresh. Justice, the Virgin, returns,
the happy reign of Saturn is restored,
and a new child is being sent down from heaven.
With him, the people of the Age of Iron
shall die out, and henceforth all over the world
a golden race arise. Chaste goddess of birth,
smile on the babe.

‘Let the centuries run’ the Fates have cried to their spindles,
‘And follow the pattern of destiny’s fixed will.’
And so, dear child of the gods, Jove’s seed, his aide,
enter on your illustrious career ----
The hour is at hand. Look how the universe
Under its great dome rocks and nods assent,
land masses, oceans, seas, the unfathomable
sky, all jubilant at the age to come.”

And Virgil was writing this at precisely the same time as Matthew was recording ----- “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

And then a little after Virgil and Matthew in Italy Suetonius in his *Life of Vespian* --- a contemporary to Jesus Christ ---- writes ----- “There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world”

And at the same time Tacitus --- writes in his *Histories* ----- “there was a firm persuasion...that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire universal empire.”

And also referring to the time of Christ --- Josephus the Jewish historian writes in his book *The Jewish Wars* ----- “about that time one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.”

All of these ---- pointing to Jesus.

And it all becomes clear at The Epiphany.

Yes Mary and Joseph ---- and many of their family members --- yes some shepherds knew there was something special about this little boy --- but they are all locals.

The Magi signal the universal revelation.

Their proclamations of -----

“This is the one.”

“Look ----- over here ----- here He is.”

“He ----- the One Micah --- Matthew ----- Virgil --- Suetonius --- Tacitus and Josephus --- all referred to ----- He’s right over here under the star that led us to Him --- come and see for yourself.”

“Come see --- it’s all good.”

And it’s all good ----- not just because it’s good for us --- or good for them.

It’s good --- not because of who benefits --- it’s not good ----- because of this or that explanation --- or this or that reason ----- prophesized or foretold by prophets ---- poets --- historians ---- wise men ---- elders --- chief priests prophets --- and so on.

It’s good --- because it’s good.

It’s good because it’s God --- and nothing or no one else.

Just as when Moses asked “What shall I tell them your name is?” --- and God replies --- “Tell them I AM.” --- “I am who I am.”

So it is here --- the wise men do what they do --- because it’s good – because of the great I am who guides them.

“What should I tell them ---- why have they followed the star --- and spent ridiculous amounts of time effort and money to travel and bow down and worship and bear gifts to this foreign little child?”

The answer ----- “Because of the great I am ---- because of the goodness of God.”

The story of the Magi ---- the Epiphany ----- is really at its heart --- one of those stories ----- that we kind of sit back and marvel at in silence and awe.

It kind of stands on its own --- in all of its radiant beauty --- like the great “I am” --- from Exodus chapter 3 --- Moses at the burning bush.

It’s too big for words really.

But if we had to use words they might be something like -----

“It’s all good now --- no more worries.”

“This is the one.”

“Over here ----- here He is.”

Or ----

“Arise, shine, our light has come --- and the glory of the Lord rises upon us.”
--- from Isaiah.

Or ----

“Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel,
who alone does marvelous things.

Praise be to his glorious name forever;
May the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen and Amen.” ----- from Psalm 72.

At Epiphany ---- it’s all good.

“This is the one.”

“Over here ----- here He is.”

And the ones who proclaim this have absolutely nothing to gain in saying
this ---- all the glory goes to God.

It’s the --- “I am who I am” ----- moment of the New Testament.

It’s a scene that bursts outside of the frame that tries to contain it.

To borrow words from the novelist and poet Jack Kerouac --- it’s like a
scene where fabulous yellow roman candles explode like spiders across the
stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes
AWWW.”

That’s the Epiphany --- yellow Roman candles exploding in the sky ---- like
spiders across the sky --- and in the centre ----- a special one ----- and under
that one --- the Christ child.

“This is the one.”

“Over here ----- here He is.”

And so now we go away and ponder and celebrate --- and bask in the glow --
---- of this great and saving truth.

“This is the one.”

“Over here ----- here He is.”

And nothing would ever be the same again thanks to the great I AM.

Amen.