

January 7th, 2018

Scripture:

Psalms 72:1-19

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

“Signs, signs, everywhere signs.”

Before I begin I have to give due credit to the Canadian band out of Ottawa - --- Five Man Electrical Band ----- as the inspiration for the sermon title came in part to their 1971 hit song --- “Signs signs, everywhere a sign” ---- anyone remember that song.

Having said that ---- the title is probably about the only thing their song and this sermon have in common --- so if you don’t know the song ----- you won’t be at a loss when it comes to today’s message.

In any event ---- signs ---- signs --- everywhere signs --- is certainly one way to think about Christmas and Epiphany.

The seasons of Christmas and Epiphany are loaded with signs.

Indeed in Luke 2 verse 12 we even have the very word sign ----- “This will be a sign to you...” --- the verse begins.

And in reality the sign from Luke 2 verse 12 ---- “a baby wrapped in cloths lying in manger” ---- is the 3rd of 5 signs associated with Christmas and Epiphany.

Christmas ---- the birth of Jesus ---- and then Epiphany the first day after the 12th day of Christmas ---- the day the world comes to realize --- in part thanks to the wise men --- that the baby Jesus is also the Christ.

Christmas and Epiphany are full of signs.

The first ----- Luke 1 verse 26-38 ---- the angel Gabriel visits Mary in Nazareth and reveals to her that she will conceive and give birth to a baby boy named Jesus who will be called the Son of Most High --- who’s kingdom will never end. ----- sign 1.

And then there is the second sign ----- also an angel --- also to a parent of this would be King Jesus.

In Matthew 1 verses 18-25 ---- an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream revealing to him that Mary will give birth to a son and that they are to call him Jesus ---- because He will save his people from their sins. --- sign 2.

And then there is sign number 3.

Where the word “sign” even appears.

In Luke 2 verse 1-20 we have the birth of Jesus --- and once again we have a sign ---- and once again we have an angel --- picking it up at verse 9 -----

“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them” ----- and then skipping ahead to verse 11 ----- “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you --- he is the Messiah the Lord. This will be a sign to you...”

Another angel and another sign ---- sign number 3.

And then there is the presentation of Jesus at the temple ---- we heard about it last week with Simeon and Anna ----- in Luke 2 verses 22-40.

Simeon takes Jesus in his hands and says ---

“Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace,
as you have promised.

I have seen your salvation,

which you have prepared for all people.

He is a light to reveal God to the nations,

and he is the glory of your people Israel!” ----- sign number 4.

And then today in our passage from Matthew’s gospel ---- we have a fifth sign.

The wise man traveling from the East bringing gifts fit for a king.

Signs, signs, everywhere signs.

How many times in your life have you looked back on something and said something like ----- “I should have seen the signs.”

“I should have seen the signs.”

God is forever giving us signs.

Nudges ---- leadings ----- encouragements ---- sometimes even bonks on the head.

God is forever guiding and leading and nudging us in certain directions.

We call the wise men wise why ----- because they were wise enough to recognize ---- to discern that it was God who was leading them ---- and so they followed.

We call them wise because they saw the signs --- and we call them wise because they followed the signs.

“I should have seen the signs.”

The Bible is full of signs --- I already mentioned a few --- 5 related to Christmas/Epiphany --- and there could be even more in the Christmas and Epiphany story if you include John the Baptist ---- Elizabeth ---- and Zechariah.

The Bible is full of signs.

The rainbow and Noah.

The pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud in the Exodus.

The dove descending when Jesus was baptized.

Indeed in John 2 verse 11 ---- after Jesus has just finished turning water into wine --- we have these words --- “What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory...”

“the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory...”

“Signs, signs everywhere signs.”

And the sign for today --- Epiphany ---- is the star that represents following God’s leading.

And the star leads the wise men to Jesus ---- and just as the wise men bow on their knees to Jesus when they get there --- so shall every knee eventually bow to Him.

Indeed in Isaiah, Philippians and Romans we have this exact sentiment --- every knee bowing before Jesus.

And even though we are no longer ruled by kings --- and the concept of king is kind of outdated ---- there are still rulers and authorities in our lives.

Jesus didn’t come so much to replace rulers and authorities --- Herod or Pilate --- presidents and prime ministers --- CEO’s and so on ----- rather Jesus came that they --- we --- might all bow down an be answerable to His authority and wisdom.

But as we can all well imagine --- this is a very hard sell.

And it’s a hard sell precisely because we live in a largely antiauthoritarian society.

As a culture we mostly simply mistrust authority ----- we are by and large antiauthoritarian --- especially many of our young people.

And sometimes we mistrust it for good reasons and sometimes we mistrust it for not so good reasons.

But antiauthoritarian or not ---- justified antiauthoritarian or not --- as Christians we are called to be obedient to God’s purposes ---- to God’s authority --- because like it or not God is in control --- and God has set the rules.

In the first light of the incarnation ---- God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ --- - the wise men have glimpsed the blazing light of Christ’s eternal glory --- and they submit in a way.

The wise men are wise why ---- because they followed --- because they saw the signs --- the sign --- and followed.

They follow ----- they kneel ---- they make an offering ---- they arise ---- and they depart.

I thought about this all week ---- “Why are the wise men in the Bible? --- Why did God choose to include them in the story of Jesus Christ?”

The story would end the same wise men or no wise men --- if we take them out of the story nothing really changes.

The answer I got over and over and over again all week as I asked God --- “What is the deal with the wise men ---- why the wise men? --- “what is the importance of the wise men?”----- the answer I got was ---- “They are in the story because they followed” ---- “They recognized a sign from God and they followed it.”

We don't know their names --- we don't know where they came from --- we don't know what they did for a living ---- we don't know what they believed ---- we don't know where they went after bowing down to Jesus.

We really don't know much about them at all.

But we do know they saw a sign --- and we do know they followed.

That's why they're in the Bible ----- that's their role in the Christ story ----- the saw a sign --- and they followed.

They remind us to follow ----- and they remind us that in light of Christ we no longer have to light our own paths.

God in Christ now lights the way for us.

Just as the star led them to Jesus Christ ----- so too are we drawn into the light of God in Jesus Christ.

That's what the magi show us --- not so much that we offer our gifts --- but that we have to follow --- and be obedient ---- and recognize the signs ----- and no longer rely on ourselves to illumine our paths.

The ----- "Arise shine, for your light has come ----- and the glory of the Lord rises upon you." ----- that we heard about in Isaiah 60 this morning is precisely what the wise men are all about.

They show us by example how to do one thing ----- and one thing well ----- follow --- arise and shine and follow the light ----- follow the sign --- follow God's lead.

What they did before this --- what they did after this --- who they actually were ----- where exactly they came from ----- we don't know.

What we do know is that they followed --- and they followed for some time - ---- over some distance --- and with resolve.

Yes they brought something ----- somethings ----- Gold --- Frankincense -- - and Myrrh --- but it is their ability to follow that is their true gift to us ---- centuries later.

They saw a sign ----- and they followed it.

They weren't the kind of people who would one day look back and say regretfully ----- "I should have seen the signs."

I can well imagine the number of people who must have said to the wise men --- "What are you doing --- and where are you going?"

A star ---- you're following a star ----- to visit some foreign king --- a baby - --- that no one else is even calling a king --- are you sure about this ----- don't you think you might be going a bit too far with this following bit.

And yet somehow they knew they simply had to follow.

Somehow they knew to follow THIS star and at this time ---- THIS sign and at this time.

And they have forever been remembered for doing just that --- following the star ---- following God's lead.

That's a legacy I'm sure we could all live with ----- being remembered simply as the ones who followed God's leading.

I could certainly live with that ---- "Him --- well I don't know or remember much about him --- but what I do know is that he tried to follow God's lead."

In a society that is ever more mistrustful of authority ----- it is harder and harder to simply follow --- obey ----- submit ---- and do what is asked even if we don't fully understand it all at the time.

And yet that is precisely what is asked of us as people of faith.

Follow ---- obey ----- submit --- do what God asks of us when he asks it of us.

Not necessarily because we want to.

Not necessarily because we can understand it or wrap our heads around it.

Not because we will necessarily get something out of it --- at least not right away.

Not even because it necessarily makes any sense or even feels right.

Obedience to God is not based on reason or a feeling ---- it's based on a leading and a commitment --- obedience --- following a sign.

A sign ---- something we decide upon --- are led to --- are drawn to --- opened up to ---- something that is revealed to us in the quietness of our being ---- by and for God.

It's deeper than a feeling ---- or a thought ----- or a desire.

It just is.

In a dark ----- stark ----- cold and lonely landscape ----- suddenly a light shines.

And suddenly a light leads.

And suddenly a light guides.

And suddenly a light.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
“Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.
Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.”

Isn't that what happened for the wise men.

Suddenly their light --- suddenly the light --- shone.

And they were drawn to it.

Sometimes we worry ---- “Will this person or that person ---- my child -----
or neighbour ----- ever experience the light of Christ?” ----- “Will I ever
truly experience the light --- God leading me a certain way?” ----- “Will I
know when I do?”

The answer ---- Don't worry --- you'll know.

And suddenly a light leads.

And suddenly a light guides.

And suddenly a light.

You'll know.

Just as the wise men knew ---- you'll know.

And not because you're good ----- or great --- or wise or faithful even.

You'll know precisely because of the goodness of God.

The wise men knew ----- the wise men followed why?

Because of the goodness of God.

Because of the goodness of God.

Signs ---- signs ----- everywhere signs.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.”

And all because of the goodness of God.

Amen.