

Richmond Hill
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Epiphany
Matthew 2:1-12
The Wise Men
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The wise men's inward journey

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. (*Matthew 2:1-12*)

We are celebrating Epiphany here tonight at Richmond Hill. It's January 3rd, three days before the actual date which ends the Christmas season. Epiphany is the celebration of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. What does that mean? Well, it means at least that the reality and power that were in Jesus were intended for people from all races and religions, and not simply for the Jews and the Jewish religion.

The church's traditional story for Epiphany is the story of the three magi, the three wise men – three religious, political, economic leaders from Persia, or from North Africa – who came across the desert to find the revelation they somehow knew, through their own studies, had come. This story has been attached to the celebration of Epiphany since at least the third century.

Tonight, I'd like to look with you a little more closely at this story. It is not simply a story about a journey of wise men from another country to meet the Jewish messiah as a baby. That is the outward journey which is most obvious in this story, and the one which is usually remarked upon.

Tonight I'd like to talk to you about the inward journey of Epiphany, and I would suggest to you that the outward journey means absolutely nothing without the inward journey. That is, it really doesn't mean a lot if three Zoroastrians become Jews. What matters is the quality of their conversion, the nature of their transformation – and that is what matters to you and me as well. Epiphany is about the journey outward of three wise men which becomes a journey inward: The inward journey of the three wise men.

- *T.S. Eliot*

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times when we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of
shelters,
And the cities dirty and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water mill beating the
darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the
lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wineskins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and
death,

But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

- The wise men went a long way to another country, but this is in many ways the shortest distance they travelled.
- They dropped down through the hierarchy of class to discover kingship at the grass roots of life.
- They returned to their own country by another road.

1. The wise men went a long way to another country; but this is in many ways the shortest distance they travelled.

Sooner or later, we go out to another country to seek the truth, to find our fortune, to find a wife or husband, to begin a career, to seek an education. Everybody has to leave home sooner or later. And some of us go a long way, or keep going longer and longer distances.

I don't know about you, but I'm thinking the big point of leaving home is to have something to help you learn. It is difference that makes you ask questions and examine your own values. It is difference that forces you to ask what is important, to choose between one way and another. People who don't experience difference never really get educated.

I've spent some time trying to explain to middle and upper middle class people why I feel the single-sociology suburban schools and high-profile colleges which are the rage in America often provide a less effective education than situations which are more multi-cultural and multi-class. I'm convinced of it, and I have seen some data to support it. I'm also involved with situations where high-dollar private schools are scrambling to import scholarship students, or developing what they call "service-learning" opportunities for their students to engage them with the 99% of the world which is not present in their single-sociology environments.

I did some of that as a young man – a lot of it, to tell the truth. When you live abroad, when you go to another place, when you visit a different culture, you begin your education in a way that never happens until that point.

The problem which affects folks in the monochrome or monocultural situations is not restricted to the middle and upper middle class. Children locked in the central city by economics and race – and lack of transportation -- have the same problem. Much of what we do in the Armstrong Leadership Program, or encourage in the Micah Association, has to do with helping children restricted to these narrow environments expand their vision of what is possible. We find, for example, that reading is seriously hampered by a lack of exposure outside the limited environment of a central city neighborhood.

Tradition says that these wise men went from present day Iran – Persia – across the desert to Jerusalem. It also suggests that one of them was black, and came from North Africa. The Persians would have been Zoroastrian. The wise men went a long way to another country. But this is in many ways the shortest distance they travelled.

2. They dropped down through the hierarchy of class to discover kingship at the grass roots of life.

Have you ever noticed what these wise men did when they got to the place they were going? They went to talk with King Herod. This suggests, certainly, that the three wise men had significant status. They were nobles, and they were important, and they were wealthy – so when they wanted to know something they came to the President of the Company, to the King of the Country. He was their contact – he was in their class.

How far away they were from the reality they were pursuing! Herod wasn't even a Jew. He was Edomite, and was treated by the Romans as the legitimate king of Judea – although the Jews knew he wasn't really anything in their own succession or hierarchy. That is, he was a puppet installed by the Romans, who didn't know the difference between a real Jew and a pretend one either.

That's the person the wise men came to to ask about this person whom they had heard somehow was born as the King of the Jews. Had they had a dream? Had some soothsayer spoken to them? Had there been rumors?

Whatever the source for their information, it wasn't a source at the highest level of government, but that's the level they went to. And they found out that Herod didn't have a clue.

The foreign country they were to visit was not another religion or another land. It was something altogether different than they had experienced, -- something that was not in their education. They were to take the idea that a king had been born and come to apply it to the baby of a simple peasant couple.

What kind of learning did that demand? How could anything like that be called royalty in their world? Where they came from, royalty was class and power and money. But here there were none of these. The only royalty that could be here was a spiritual royalty, a moral royalty, an integrity, a clarity, -- the kind of royalty that represents authentic humanity. This was a kingship which placed external things as the least important and internal things as the most important.

The kings' visit was not a long one in duration, apparently, but it inaugurated a journey that would be unending. The trip from Herod's palace to the Bethlehem manger was far shorter than the trip across the desert from Persia to Jerusalem, but immeasurable farther in consciousness and import. Inner light replaced outer light. Inner wealth replaced outer. Integrity replaced status.

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3. They returned to their own country by another road.

What happens when you discover the pearl of great price, when you find something which changes your life, is this: you eventually must go back to your own country – to your own identity, to your own family, to your own sense of things, but you must go by another road.

This is not a charted path, as the other one was. When the wise men came from Persia to Jerusalem, they followed the path which people followed. It was no secret. It was a well known road, one of the best known roads in the world. And so do all of us – whether it is in our education, or our training, -- in whatever steps we take, we try to find a roadmap, a way to go which makes sense, where others have walked.

But when something truly happens to us, when it all comes together and it matters, we find that we must begin to find our own way – that there is no manual or road map for our particular life – that we cannot be who God has called us to be with someone else's pre-written instructions.

T. S. Eliot wrote his poem *The Gift of the Magi* in 1927, the year of his conversion to Christianity. It's a powerful poem, reintroduced to me yesterday by a Jewish friend who loved it. "Were we led all that way," the magi asked, "for Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly, We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death, But had thought they were different."

They found, however, that the introduction of the reality of God's simplicity in their lives – and the reality of his simple presence – caused a wrenching change in their own lives. As Eliot describes it, "this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death. We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation."

Another 20th Century poet, William Butler Yeats, picked up a similar theme in his poem *The Second Coming*, written in 1919. "Twenty centuries of stony sleep (have been) vexed to nightmare by (the) rocking cradle" of Jesus, he said.

An inner journey begins, one which will never end, in which we must come to terms with the reality of God, not as some distant, impressive king, not as some set of doctrines or massive, unapproachable power, -- but rather as the one who is so small and real that he can engender a seed within us which will grow an eternal life in our own bodies. We will return home, to be sure, but it will be by another way.

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It is not the star in the sky that is the sign of the kingdom of heaven. It is the star growing in the heart of the wise men and women who have gone a long way to another country, but for whom this is the shortest distance they have traveled. They have dropped down through the hierarchy of class to discover kingship at the grass roots of life. And they are, even now, full of light, returning to their own country by another road.

AMEN.