

The Epiphany

Part 1:

God's Call To Us

Scripture: *Matthew 2:1-23.*

Exegetical Big Idea: God calls us to Himself through the light of Christ.

Sermon Introduction

Tomorrow, January 6th, has traditionally been called **Epiphany** on the liturgical Calendar of the Christian Church. The word *epiphany* comes from the Greek word, *epiphaneia*, which means *manifestation* or *appearance*. So, in the English language, this word *epiphany*, has come to mean *the sudden realization or comprehension of something*.

Throughout the Christian centuries the church has used this word **Epiphany** to refer to the narrative in **Matthew 2** about the visit of the Magi, or the wise men, to the infant Christ Jesus because this was Christ's first *manifestation* or *revelation* to the Gentiles. The Church has considered that event to be important enough to be commemorated every year on 6th January, twelve days after Christmas.

In my own view one of the reasons for the importance to Christians of the story of the Magi is that their story reminds us of how God *calls* us, how God *guides* us, and how God *provides* for our Christian journey. For every one of us here this morning, the beginning of this New Year 2020, marks the beginning of a new Calendar phase of our Christian journey. So, over the next three Sundays, we will meditate on the story of the Magi, and trust the Lord to provide to us from their story some encouragement about our own Christian journey in this New Year.

This morning our topic is: *God's Call*. In this first sermon, from the story of the Magi, we will remind ourselves of three things related to God's call to us. First, we will remind ourselves of God's call to us through His *preceding* grace. Second, we will reflect on the actual *process* of God's call to us. And third, we will remind ourselves of the *purpose* of God's call to us.

Throughout this series of three sermons our primary text will be the story of the Magi in **Matthew 2**. As we meditate on this passage we will be as faithful to the text as we can be by seeking to get rid of the many myths about the Magi and their journey to worship the infant Christ that have developed over the Christian centuries in the form of many different stories and songs. *Read text.*

I. Preceding Grace

- 1) In **verse 1** of our text, the KJV refers to *wise men*. The NIV Bible refers to *Magi*. The word *Magi* comes from the old Persian word, *maguš*.

This Persian word, *magus*, refers to the priests of an ancient religion called Zoroastrianism that was widely practiced throughout ancient Persia. Although today Islam is the predominant faith in Iran, which is the historical ancient Persia, there are still many adherents of Zoroastrianism in that country, and around the world.

- 2) As part of their religion, the Magi studied the stars. They gained a worldwide reputation for their understanding of astronomy, and for their practice of astrology. Astronomy is the scientific study of the stars. Astrology, on the other hand, is the study of the movements and the positions of the stars and the interpretation of these movements and positions as having an influence on human life in the world. As astronomers, the Magi knew every star and had names for them. As astrologers, they believed that the stars moved around in the sky according to patterns that reflected the movements of human life. So, according to their understanding, anything unusual that happened in the stars was a reflection of something unusual that would happen, or had happened, among human beings here on the earth. The Magi also dabbled in occultism and sorcery. This is why our English word *magic* is derived from the word, *Magi*.
- 3) So, basically, the Magi were pagan Gentiles, spiritually lost in darkness, groping for some transcendent meaning to life through their study of the stars. Yet, it was to these pagan astrologers, the Magi, groping for meaning to life by peering at the stars at night, that God made an unexpected appearance in the form of a bright luminous light that the Magi referred to as *a star* in **verse 2** of our passage. Evidently, God made His unexpected appearance to the Magi in the very night skies they spent so much time studying! God came to them in a fashion the Magi were familiar with. He came to them where they were in their astrology and superstition, groping in the darkness of their world.
- 4) The Bible is full of such stories of God coming to reveal Himself to people where they are. For example, in the OT, in **Exodus 4** God came to Moses in the burning bush in the wilderness to draw Moses to come and see and hear Him right where Moses was comfortable. In the NT, in **John 4**, Jesus came to the well where the Samaritan woman was comfortable and revealed Himself as the Messiah to her.
- 5) Bible scholars refer to this experience of God coming to people unexpectedly where and how they are as the evidence of God's *preceding grace* because it is God's grace that precedes our own independent conscious decision to seek God. Through His preceding grace God calls us in a way that does not overpower our freewill but, instead, in a way that empowers our freewill to respond positively to Him. This is exactly what we see God doing in the lives of the Magi in this passage.
- 6) In **1 Peter 2:9** the Apostle Peter refers to this experience as God calling us out of darkness into His marvelous light. In this verse, **1 Peter 2:9**, the Greek word that Peter uses for *call* is *kaleo*. This Greek word is usually used in the NT to describe God's summons to us to come into saving faith and union with His Son Christ Jesus.

This is also why, in the NT, the Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which literally means *the called out ones*. Christians are those *called out* of the world by God to become His set apart people.

- 7) So, we can summarize **our first P** about God's call to us by saying that God's initial call to us involves His *preceding* grace by which He intervenes in our lives in such a way that we are inexorably drawn to Him, just as we see Him doing in the lives of the Magi in this passage.

II. The Process

- 1) I am going to refer to what the Magi called a *star* in this passage as *the light of Christ* for two reasons. First, because it was a supernatural light. Second, because it led the Magi to Christ. Somehow the Spirit of God made the Magi connect the bright light that appeared to them with the birth of Christ because when they arrived in Jerusalem they said, in **verse 2**, *we saw His star in the East*.
- 2) In **verses 9 and 11** we read that this light of Christ led the Magi to a specific house in Bethlehem. We know from modern astronomy that the stars we see in the sky at night are planets and other celestial entities whose light reach us on the planet earth from billions of miles away. This means that it was not *a star* in the *astronomical* sense of the word that appeared to the Magi. It was, instead, a bright light of supernatural origin that we can rightly call *the light of Christ*.
- 3) Notice how this light of Christ came to the Magi. God did not wait for the Magi to come looking for Him. He came to them. He knew the exact nature of their darkness and he reached into that darkness with the light of Christ.
- 4) The Magi were astronomers with enough knowledge of the stars to know that the bright light they had seen was something supernatural. They were also astrologers enough to know that this was a communication with them from beyond their natural world.
- 5) This is your story and my story. In whatever way God came to us, He came where we were, to begin our Christian journey by shining the bright light of Christ into the darkness, the pain, and the confusion of our lives. He did this perhaps through our hearing a sermon, through a friend or relative sharing the Gospel with us, or perhaps through our reading a devotional book, etc.
- 6) By doing this, we read in **Col. 1:13-14** that *God delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*. In the fourth stanza of his hymn, *And Can It Be*, that we just sang, this is how Charles Wesley described his own experience of God breaking into his life with the light of Christ (*Read*).
- 7) So, we can summarize **our second P** by saying that God's call to us involves this *process* of His breaking into the darkness of our lives with the bright light of Christ, as He did in the lives the Magi in this passage.

III. The Purpose

- 1) Still in **verse 2** we read that when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem they said: *Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and we have come to worship him.* This tells us that the Magi understood that the reason God had called them out of their darkness was to come to worship Christ.
- 2) With this understanding, therefore, this is exactly what the Magi did when they found the infant Christ because we read in **verse 11** that, *And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.* The verse goes on to tell us that the Magi worshipped the infant Christ by *opening their treasures, and offering to the child their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.* The Magi's worship involved the complete surrender of the ownership of their precious gifts to the Christ child.

This was quite extraordinary because the Magi came from a culture in which people worshipped countless gods; they had gods for everything – a god of agriculture, a god of fertility, a god of war, etc. The worship of idols was an accepted way of life for the Magi, but now, here they were, leaving all of that behind, and coming to worship the one true God! This is extraordinary!

- 3) The worship of many, many gods in the ancient world is the reason why the first of the Ten Commandments the Lord gave to the children of Israel, in **Exodus 20:3**, says this: *You shall have no other gods before me.* In **verse 2**, before God gave them this first commandment in **verse 3** He first said this: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* By saying this, God was telling the Israelites that having experienced for themselves the supernatural way in which He had delivered them out of bondage in Egypt, He expected that this would convince them of His ability to meet all their needs.
- 4) By saying to them, *you shall have no other gods*, God was actually making this promise to them: *You shall not have any need for any other gods besides myself because henceforth I will sufficiently provide for all your needs.* This is why God naturally follows the first commandment with the second commandment that tells the Israelites that they should worship Him alone, not idols.
- 5) When we get to the NT, this is the exact same point that Paul makes to the NT people of God in two places in his epistle to the Roman Christians. First, in **Rom. 8:32** Paul writes this: *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* In this verse, Paul is asking the NT people of God to trust in God's ability to meet all our needs on the basis of Christ's work on the cross to deliver us from bondage to sin and Satan, in the same way that God asked His OT people look at the way He had delivered them from bondage in Egypt as the evidence of His ability to meet all their needs.

Second, in **Rom. 12:1-2**, Paul writes this: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* When Paul writes here, *in view of God's mercy*, he is again reminding us of God's amazing mercy to us sinners that was permanently displayed by Christ's work on the cross for us.

Paul is also saying here that on the cross, Christ became a living sacrifice for us so that when we obey God's call and come to Him, we too can offer to God, as a living sacrifice, our very lives and everything that God gives to us, as our real spiritual act of worship.

- 6) We use the word *worship* these days to refer to the music we sing in church but the actual and original meaning of the word is: *to acknowledge the worth of a person or an object.* The original old English word is *worth-ship*. To worship, therefore, means to demonstrate great admiration, devotion, or reverence towards a person or an object in recognition of their merit, their *worth* or *worthiness* because of what we obtain, or hope to obtain, from that person or object.

This is why we often find ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, worshipping idols in our lives. An idol is anything that, if we lost, we would not consider life worth living because it is what gives us functionally, our sense of meaning, security, purpose, and satisfaction in life. These can include our work, our ministry, our family, our money, our identity, our assets, and even our religiosity.

- 7) So, we can summarize **our third P** by saying that God's call to the Magi out of their darkness to come to worship Christ shows us that the *purpose* of God's call to us is for us to learn to truly worship Him alone with everything we are, everything we have, and everything we do as He works daily in our lives to conform us to the image of Christ.

Conclusion

This is how story of the Magi reminds us of God's call to us through His *preceding* grace, and this how it also reminds us of the actual *process* of His call to us, and the *purpose* of His call to us.

In December 2016 I paid a visit to my home country of Ghana. During that visit I found that the word *Dumsor* was on everybody's lips. This word was being used to refer to the persistent and unpredictable disruptions of electricity that was then plaguing the country. The word *Dumsor* is derived from two separate words from the Akan language that is widely spoken across the country: **Dum** means *to turn off*, and **Sɔ** (*sor*) means *to turn on*. *Dumsor*, therefore, roughly translates as "off-and-on." The electricity is turned off, and then several hours later, it is turned on again. After several hours of being turned off, whenever the electricity was restored, you could almost hear the sigh of relief and joy that would sweep across the city of Accra. This is because electricity does not only bring light; it also brings electrical power to run businesses, factories, homes, hospitals, etc.

In this same way, God calls us through the light of Christ so that this light of Christ would come into our lives to dispel our darkness, to begin our Christian journey, to give us inner spiritual power over temptation, sin, and idols in our lives, and to empower us for a lifetime journey of learning to worship the one true God alone.

In **John 8:12**, Jesus said: *I am the light of the world*. On the cross He, the light of world, willingly allowed the darkness of our sins to put Him to death. When we respond to His call, and by faith, surrender our lives to Him, as Christ tells us in **Matt. 5:14** that we become *the light of the world* so that by our *words* and by our *works* we bring His light into the darkness of other people's lives in the power of the Holy Spirit.

May this be true in all our lives in this New Year.

Next Sunday, we shall continue our reflections on the story of the Magi by looking at how God *guides* our Christian journey after He has called us, through the light of Christ, to Himself.

Let us pray!

Rev. Canon E. Kwasi Amofo, PhD
Tigoni,
December 10th, 2019.