Sermon 01-05-20

They Couldn’t Say, “Hey Siri”

Matthew 2:1-12

**Sermon Starter**

**GRAPHIC: January is a dismal month.**

The pine roping has dried out, the candles have burned down, the multicolored decorations have served their purpose. When all is put away, everything looks plain and ordinary.

We’ve celebrated the holiday season from Halloween through New Year’s Day, but now, in the bleak month of January, the festivities are over. Remember last year? We postpone or cancel activities because the weather is so brutal; and now, when we look in our mailboxes, instead of receiving colorful catalogues and beautiful Christmas cards with warm messages, **GRAPHIC: we get a plain black and white letter from the IRS.**

Seems like all we are left to do in January is mope around with the post-Christmas doldrums.

But we don’t have to. After all, the church year doesn’t make provisions for being glum. For though Christmas is over, it concludes on a day we call Epiphany.

**GRAPHIC: Epiphany celebrates the arrival of the Magi (wise men) to visit Jesus**, but the day has been overshadowed by Christmas. Epiphany is observed on January 6 and the time in between Christmas Day and Epiphany is called the “12 days of Christmas.”

**GRAPHIC: “Epiphany” derives from a Greek word meaning “manifestation” or “to come forth.”[[1]](#endnote-1)** By that, the church means the revealing of Christ to the Gentile world. And the first Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as the “king of the Jews” were the Magi. This day is celebrated in different ways around the world. **GRAPHIC: In Latin America, the day is called “Día de los Tres Reyes”** or **GRAPHIC: “Three Kings Day,” and it is a much bigger deal in those countries than here.** In fact, in some countries, you get gifts on Epiphany instead of on Christmas! Children are told to leave hay for the three kings’ camels — or horses, in some traditions — and the kings will leave three presents for them — the same number of gifts Jesus got.

While most crèches show the shepherds and wise men worshiping Jesus together in the stable, it’s more likely that the Magi arrived as much as two years later, when Joseph and Mary had no doubt found other lodging. For dating the visit of the Magi, remember that they didn’t leave their home country -- Persia (Iraq today) -- until they saw the star, and their only means of travel would have been camel, donkey or horse. Also, it is significant that after the wise men visited Herod, Herod ordered the slaughter of all male infants in and around Bethlehem, *two years old* and younger.

**The glory of the Lord**

The Epiphany observance may have been introduced by the church in Egypt to replace the pagan celebration of the birth of light at the winter solstice. It was celebrated in honor of the Baptism of Christ (sometimes also in connect with the Nativity) from the 3rd century onwards. Clement of Alexandria reports that the Gnostic sect of the Basilideans observed a feast in honor of the Baptism of Christ around this time of year and from the 4th century there is ample evidence for the feast, which then ranked with Easter and Pentecost as one of the three principal festivals of the Church. One of its main features in the East is the solemn blessing of water.

Epiphany was introduced to the Western church in the 4th century, but here lost its character as a feast of the Baptism of Christ, which was retained in the Eastern church down to this day. Instead it became associated with the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the person of the Magi.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In any case, on this day of Epiphany, our eyes are drawn heavenward, as were the Magi, to the star of Bethlehem. The message is one of light; as we heard it from the prophet Isaiah, “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.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

**GRAPHIC: If there is anything that demonstrates to us the magnificence of God’s creation, it is looking up into the heavens on a clear night and seeing thousands of twinkling stars.** Even more profound is seeing a change in the heavens, the movement of the stars from season to season.

When we see an eclipse of the moon or of the sun, we know that we indeed are small, and that God’s creation is so much greater than we are in our little neighborhoods.

So, we celebrate a time of brightness that comes not just for us, here, but for the whole world. The drama of this day is the arrival of the wise men following the star -- foreigners who saw the glory of God from far away.

These “wise men” were probably Zoroastrian astronomers from Persia. Their religion was dualistic; that meant that for them body and spirit were separate. What was spiritual was good, what was physical was evil. **GRAPHIC: They studied the heavens because they believed that what was happening in the heavens were signs of what would happen on earth**. And the message they received from the heavens must have knocked their socks off; because the sign they saw in the heavens pointed them to a human being who was divine. Something physical that was good.

Yet, instead of dismissing it as contradictory to their belief, they boldly followed the sign to find this child.

Meanwhile, back in the land of Israel, where the population believed that body and spirit were one; and that God had created human beings and called them good, they were looking for a physical Messiah who would come to establish a new nation, saving people not only physically but spiritually. What’s more, this savior would come to redeem not only Israel but the whole world.

**GRAPHIC: The amazing pilgrimage of the foreigners from Persia to worship and honor this king signaled the fulfillment of this prophecy.**

**Looking for meaning**

Even though Jesus has come, today we still search for a savior. We scour the heavens for a sign telling us how we got here. We analyze the human body and mind in order to figure out what makes us tick.

We look for meaning everywhere we go. **GRAPHIC: And most of us, at one time or another, have had an inspiration -- a ray of understanding**. But just at that moment, when we fall on our knees to express our awe and wonder at God’s presence in our lives, God moves in another direction. Just when we want to settle down and relax in our faith, God sends us on another course.

This is a little disconcerting for us. For we are creatures of routine, of habit, of ritual, of tradition. In fact, it is sometimes the tradition, the ritual and habit, the routine that gives us meaning in our lives. We look for order, for connection, for logic. **GRAPHIC: But what God gives us is surprises. Just when we think we have our feet firmly planted, standing on the promises, God pulls the rug out from under our feet.**

The wise men, looking for a king, logically went to the palace of the reigning king. You go to royalty to look for royalty. But the child king was not there.

Even though King Herod instructed the wise men to find the child for him, saying he wished to worship the child also, God changed the course of the wise men, telling them to go home by another way.

God’s way is not the course of routine, of ritual, of tradition, of habit. And if we follow God’s will, chances are, our lives won’t take a logical course.

* The logical course would have left Abraham enjoying his wealth and comfort in Mesopotamia. But God called him to go to Canaan.
* The logical course for Sarah was to accept barrenness as her lot in life; but no, God called her to bear a child at the age of 90.
* The logical course for Moses would have been for him to continue to tend the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro in the land of Midian. Yet God led Moses to face the Pharaoh and move the children of Israel across the Red Sea.
* The logical course for Ruth would be for her to return to Moab to her family after her husband died. But God called her to remain with Naomi, to go to a foreign land with a bitter and demoralized old woman. By following God’s lead, Ruth was to become the great grandmother of King David.
* The logical course for Joseph would have been to divorce Mary. But God called Joseph to wed Mary and give the child a house and lineage.
* The logical course for the Wise Men would be to stay put in Persia; but God’s course took them on a difficult journey to the tiny country of Israel.
* The logical course would be to find a child king in a palace, but they were led to find the child in a house in Bethlehem.

**God sets other courses**

It might appear that God was toying with all these people; but Matthew says, there was a reason for everything.

We have a notion of the way life is supposed to be; the course we are supposed to take. And when our plans are thrown awry, we cry out, **GRAPHIC: “not fair.”** And indeed, it may not be fair, if all we’re going by is our own sense of logic.

But we ought to expect that God will send us on other courses, too. Courses we never would have chosen for ourselves. **GRAPHIC: Yet, when we follow God’s lead by faith, even the most miserable experience can give meaning and purpose.**

Each day is part of your journey to fulfill the course God sets before you. And if you follow, each day will be a journey in faith, in which you will find yourself closer to God.

This journey is not just for individuals. God has called communities, nations, and the church. **GRAPHIC: So indeed, God calls us, as a church to reach beyond ourselves.**

Listen to the angels and follow God’s course for your lives. For God’s way is to grow to by serving others. Abraham moved his family and flocks to a promised land; Sarah raised a child when she was in her old age. Moses freed his people from slavery. Ruth followed her mother in law to Israel. Joseph and Mary went to great lengths to protect and raise Jesus. The Wise Men left home to worship a baby.

**GRAPHIC: Listen for the course God wants you to take and celebrate that course as we begin this new year. Take that step!**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), accesses 12/10/2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, Ed., The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 3rd Edition Revised (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 557 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Isaiah 60:1 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)