

Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2019
Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

When I was in my 20s, while it seemed that a number of my friends were heading away from church, or at least attending less frequently, I found myself headed in the opposite direction—and I really couldn't help myself. I had experienced something that had caught my imagination, caught hold of my deepest hopes and longings, and it was drawing me deeper in.

What I experienced had two elements. First, I had experienced church as a genuinely distinctive community—a community that generally operated differently than the world around me. It wasn't that church was perfect, or filled with perfect people. It was that the people seemed to value something different—they valued compassion; they weren't judgmental, but instead were able to make room for people who might seem a little odd; they weren't only all about themselves, but instead cared about what was going on in the world, especially as it affected people who were poor, or hungry. I found that to be profoundly meaningful—being part of something that matters!

The second thing was this—I heard something truly and deeply compelling in Jesus' message of forgiveness, of hope for healing for the human family. It seemed to me that our society was pushing a vision for life rooted in greed and violence, lionizing characters like Rambo, and everything was me and mine. But I couldn't escape the feeling that the only way ahead for the human family was Jesus' way of forgiveness and love of enemies, his way of generosity and inclusive community. In Jesus' way of life and his teachings, I felt hope for the future—and I wanted to be part of a community shaped by and dedicated to everything that Jesus is.

As I look back on it, I'd say that I was feeling something that Martin Luther describes in the Small Catechism. Luther says the work of the Holy Spirit is to call us through the Gospel. When we feel ourselves grabbed by Jesus message or work, when it sparks a feeling of hope in our hearts, or when we know ourselves to be loved and forgiven, and we want more—that's the work of the Holy Spirit, calling us through the Gospel into life with God.

Our Gospel story for this morning offers a wonderful image for this gift of God. The wise men follow the star that leads them to Jesus, where they worship and offer their gifts. It might surprise us if we think about it a bit. The wise men came from

Persia to look for Jesus. They were astrologers who studied the stars—the word Matthew uses describes Zoroastrian priests who told fortunes, interpreted dreams, and prepared daily horoscopes. They studied the stars in an effort to figure out—what would happen? What does it all mean? We might think that horoscopes are a bunch of nonsense, but our gospel writer pictures the Spirit of God as working through their search for signs in the stars in order to bring them to Jesus. It doesn't seem to matter that they were practitioners of another religion. Whether or not they had the correct theology or the right answers doesn't seem to be important at all. The one essential thing was that the Spirit of God was leading them to Jesus, and they followed!

It's such a powerful image! And it's so much like us. It isn't important whether we grew up in a Christian family, or were drawn to Jesus by a difficult experience later in life. It really doesn't matter whether our road to faith had lots of detours, or has felt relatively straight; whether we've felt confident of being on the right path, or all along the way we felt lost. The one thing that matters is that the Holy Spirit has been leading you, that you've been following that star.

And it makes me wonder: what has led you to where you are, being a person of faith, being part of this community of faith. I wonder if there have been significant people in your life who have helped shape your faith. Or maybe you've gone through some eventful experiences in life that have made you look deeper for strength or wisdom. Or maybe you've heard something in the Christian faith that has drawn you in, or sparked a fire in your heart. I'd like to ask you to take just a minute or so to share in groups of two or three—as you look back, how do you see that the Holy Spirit has been calling you? What has been that star for you, leading you to Jesus?

I wonder if anyone would be willing to share—if it's OK with your conversation partner—what you heard. Through what sort of the things has the Holy Spirit been calling and leading? Thank you all for sharing.

In the Small Catechism, Luther goes on to say that, not only does the Holy Spirit call us through the Gospel, but also enlightens us with God's gifts and makes us holy—which means sets our lives apart for God's purposes of healing and blessing and community. And our gospel story has an image for that as well—when the wise men kneel before Jesus to worship him, they offer their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

It turns out that God has a much greater and more expansive vision for our lives than we do. God wants to make each and every one of us part of God's great work to heal and reconcile the human family, to bring an end to war and poverty and suffering, and give instead blessing and peace. For our part, it requires offering up our lives so that we can listen and attend to how God wants to use us and the gifts we have. That's what it means for the Spirit to make us God's holy people. Like the wise men offering up their treasures, we offer up the treasures we hold so dearly—our self, our identity, our desires. We offer them to God so that God might reshape our lives with Jesus' values of compassion and forgiveness, of community and generosity.

And here's the big surprise—as we offer up those treasures, we discover that God is blessing us with an even greater treasure. We discover that we are God's beloved children, treasured by God and held in God's love forever. There is nothing that can separate us from our Creator's love. We discover that we are part of God's eternal and worldwide family—forgiven, and blessed with God's promise of eternal life. We are rich with peace and hope. And we discover that we have an important role to play in the unfolding of God's loving intentions for the whole human family, and that God gives us gifts, every day, to be part of that great work of healing. We go into our lives with a sense of hope and purpose that is greater than anything we might imagine for ourselves.

Child of God—whatever star it is that has led you to Jesus, and whatever treasure you are laying before your Lord, know first of all that God treasures you. And God's Spirit is calling you every day into Jesus' way of love and compassion and forgiveness—because that is the treasure that will make your life truly and deeply rich. Thanks be to God. Amen