

Epiphany

It is now 12 Days after Christmas –

I had never thought of the song “The 12 Days of Christmas” as being a religious song – but recently someone here in the congregation had asked me about it so I had to think about it.

In any of the seminary classes I have taken, we never studied the song “The 12 Days of Christmas”. I don’t ever remember running across anything about it in any of the literature I have read – and I don’t ever remember hearing any of my friends talk about it recently.

So I thought I would look into this a little more. For some of you, you probably already know what I found – you just have smarter friends that I do – or you paid more attention in church than I did.

I do remember as a kid growing up, I was always told that the song “The 12 Days of Christmas” was a Jewish song celebrating the days of Hanukkah. Right away I see two problems with that theory. 1) Typically Jewish people don’t celebrate Christmas, and the second issue is that there are 8 days of Hanukkah not 12.

Then I remember hearing from my childhood that the 12 days of Christmas were the 12 days preceding Christmas – that they just couldn’t wait until Christmas so they started giving gifts early.

But then I got thinking, if we count the 12 days after Christmas – where do we end up? Let's look at that. We end up with the 6th of January – that's today. And today – 12 days after Christmas, is a day we celebrate something called The Epiphany.

So the song "The 12 Days of Christmas" isn't a song celebrating Hanukkah, it isn't being excited about receiving gifts for 12 days before Christmas, but actually it is about celebrating every day after Christmas until we come to the day called The Epiphany.

But The Epiphany is a day that is clouded by misunderstanding as well. It is the day we typically celebrate the men that went to visit Jesus and give the gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.

But that brings up more questions – Some people say that they were 3 kings, others 3 wise men. Some people say that they visited Jesus in the manger, while others say that they visited Jesus in a home – possibly up to 2 years after his birth.

Let's look at the first part – who were these people? Well, it is commonly believed that they were Zoroastrian Priests from the land of Persia. They weren't Jews and didn't necessarily believe in one True God. They were intellectuals that were aware of other religions – and in their specific religion, they looked to the stars for answers, using astrology – kind of like using horoscopes.

But in a way that only God could do, he reached out to these people, through their own religion, using the stars, to show them that there is something more for them – something bigger and better available to them.

It is commonly believed that Jesus was no longer in the manger when these men showed up. For one reason it tells us in the Gospel of Matthew that they followed the star to the house where Mary and Joseph were – it didn't say a manger.

Also, if the star began to show when Jesus was born, it would have taken a long time to get to Bethlehem from Persia – possibly a couple of years.

So it is pretty well believed today that the wise men didn't visit Jesus in the manger – however it does make for a more complete nativity scene.

The other question that comes up is how many wise men were there? Nowhere in the Bible does it say three wise men. Actually it is believed that there were complete caravans traveling with them, as nobody traveled alone in those days. There also could have been 10 wise men – we don't know. We just say three because we know that there were three gifts – Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.

But the beauty of The Epiphany isn't how many wise men showed up to see Jesus, it doesn't really matter where they visited Jesus, and actually it doesn't really matter when they visited Jesus.

The true beauty of the Epiphany is that they did visit Jesus – and here is why.

For centuries the Jews had been looking for the birth of the Christ Child – the Messiah – the Savior. On Christmas we mentioned that the first ones told by the angels about Jesus being born were some poor shepherds tending their sheep. This showed us right away that Salvation through Christ isn't only for the rich, isn't only for priests, isn't only for kings – but salvation through Christ is available no matter what your social-economic status is.

But here is the catch – the Shepherds were still Jewish. According to the Bible, the Jews are God's chosen people. So the fact that the angels showed up to the shepherds, while being remarkable, still doesn't do anything for those of us that aren't Jewish – also referred to as the Gentiles.

The beauty of the Epiphany is that God reached out to the Gentiles through their own religions, through their own beliefs, to come and see the miracle of the Christ child.

Many people – even at the seminaries – say that this is the moment of The Epiphany – with the realization that God is for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. That this was a moment of awakening – a moment of understanding.

But for me, I don't think the Epiphany came at that time – I don't think there was an Epiphany from the time the wise men saw the star – through the entire time they traveled – to the time they spoke with Herod the King, even up to the time they saw the star resting over Jesus' home.

I think they were aware they were following God's will. I think they were aware that this wasn't a regular trip for them – I even think they were aware that something great was awaiting them.

But these 3 men, if you will, were scholars – intellectuals - we might even want to call them scientists. Sure they were excited, but I don't think that is where the Epiphany was.

I don't think they fully understood what was happening until they walked into Mary and Joseph's home, looked at their small child named Jesus, and, as the Bible said, they **fell down** and worshiped him.

One definition for Epiphany is “a manifestation of great emotion.” That is when I believe the true Epiphany happened – those wise men knew God in more than their minds – they opened their hearts and felt God. Great emotion came upon them and they **fell down** and worshiped Jesus.

Wise men from a foreign land – Gentiles – found God not just with their minds, but they found God with their hearts. At that point, God showed them - and showed the world - that everyone can have a personal relationship with God – not just the Jewish people.

And how did the Jews respond to the news that the Messiah was born?

For centuries the Jews were looking for the Christ – the Messiah – the Savior. When told that the Christ child was born, the ruling king tried to have him killed.

I am sure the king knew all of the ancient writing about God and the Messiah. I assume the king went to the temple to worship God on a regular basis.

But the problem was that King Herod only knew of God here in his head. In his heart he didn't know God – nor did he really want to.

He was more worried about this new “King of the Jews” being born. Herod probably wondered if he would he lose his crown? Would he lose respect? Would he have to kneel down to this other king? How would his life change because this child being born? Herod had no clue what it really meant to have the Savior born into the world.

The wise men showed something different. Sure, at first they only knew of some of the teaching and writings of the Jewish religion – but they opened themselves up to understand more and followed where God was leading them – they followed the star to Jesus. Then, they opened their hearts even more and received God into their lives.

So, how about us? How do we respond when we hear about Christ being in the world? Similar to Herod and the wise men, we have heard the stories, we have heard the tales.

But the question is, are we like the wise men? Do we follow God to where he is leading us, and then truly open our hearts and accept God into our lives? Or do we lean more towards being like King Herod, pretend to go through the motions, but truly only want God if it doesn't change anything in our lives?

Christ is alive today – We can be just like the wise men and see the miracle he brings to all of us – simply by opening our hearts and accepting the gift of salvation he offers us.

We can have our own Epiphany by opening our minds and opening our hearts to the truth that we are accepted by God, no matter what our background is, no matter what our race or nationality is, no matter what our social-economic background is, no matter who we are – we are acceptable to God.

Something is leading all of us in our lives towards something bigger.

Some of us have found it, while others are still searching for it. The fact that we are all here shows that something is leading us – as we are searching for answers.

Maybe we don't have a star in the sky leading us, – but maybe our star is a special feeling, or something tugging at our heart - something that is leading all of us. We just can't be afraid to find what it's leading us to – or who it is leading us to.

If we follow our own star to where it leads us, and we truly find God and open ourselves up to receive Him - at that point we all can have a sudden moment of clarity and understanding – we then have our own Epiphany.

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