
What Comes to Light

Matthew 2:1-12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 3, 2010 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer

Epiphany is a day heavily associated with light...the light of a solitary star, the light of revelation, and the light of the world cradled in a manger. I want to describe two pictures of light.

The first takes me back to when I was a little girl in Colorado. Colorado has its share of summer storms, and growing up it wasn't too long before I realized that a lot of them include pretty intense lightning. The storms are big and loud and scary and beautiful. When I was little, they filled me with dread. But once I got over the fear, and as long as I was safely inside...I grew to really love those summer storms. I especially loved those nights when the sky would be dark and rumbley and suddenly there would be a fantastic flash of light and for a few moments the sky above and the whole neighborhood below would be lit up under a powerful current of lightning dashing across the sky. It was almost as if it were daylight, the lightning was so bright. Reformation theologian John Calvin said that lightning storms were similar to God's revelation. He said that on our own, we walk through life as if on a dark night...our eyes may adjust to the night, we learn to see big shapes and shadows...and we manage to stumble and learn our way around. But we don't ever see things with clear vision and clear light. But, there are those moments...those lightning strike moments...when God illuminates the earth and for a brief while we can see things as God intends...for a few moments we've been given a gift of light. And it changes what we know about the world. Calvin says that's revelation. That is epiphany.

I often long for God to speak to me in lightning strike experiences. I want the big, loud, clear moments of revelation when my world is illuminated and suddenly the next steps are clear as day.

But this brings me to the second picture.

Several years ago I took a trip through various parts of the Middle East. About 2.5 weeks into our journey, we found ourselves at the base of Mt. Sinai for an early morning hike up the mountain. It was about 2:30am when we set off, and the first 1.5 hours of the journey we each sat atop a camel as they loped up the mountain. The last hour of the hike was up what they call the "stairs of penance" which were laid in the ancient church by a monk who was doing penance for his sins. I don't know what that guy did, but it was either exceptionally bad, or he had a highly overdeveloped sense of guilt. Yet, boy, was I grateful for those stairs! It was a tough, cold hike, through the dark. Our group of 20 made our way steadily up the mountain and we then sat at the top in the early morning hours, waiting for the sun to rise. I was aware of some other nearby chatter, and imagined that another group must have made a similar trek. But when the sun came up, you can imagine my surprise to realize there were literally hundreds of people atop the mountain. I gradually discovered this wasn't just my personal quest up Mt. Sinai...not even close...it was a shared experience...shared with people from all corners of the earth, each speaking their own language...all of whom found themselves perched atop the mountain in eager anticipation for light to dawn. We were all seeking revelation. And this moment of revelation wasn't as loud or as sudden as the lightening strikes of my childhood...it was a gradual, gentle progression, where my surroundings slowly became more and more visible, more and more illuminated by the rising sun.

What I discovered that morning on Mt. Sinai was that sometimes God's revelation comes in the gradual way of a sunrise. We come to apprehend God in a number of different ways—it may be through the brilliant and sudden flash of lightning, or it may be through the gentle and steady arrival of the sun. If you look at the story of the wise men...the story we read every year to celebrate Epiphany...I would argue this story is one that less about lightning strikes and more about a gradual coming to light...a gradual revealing that takes place in the midst of a journey, not a single moment or lightning flash.

And so I want to look at the Epiphany story through the lens of a sunrise. What comes to light in this story? What is gradually unveiled for the wise men, *and for us*? There are three dimensions of the story that I want to

dwell on this morning. This is a story that on the front end is about learning the way to go, on the back end about learning the way *not* to go, and in the middle, learning who is with you along the way.

When we first encounter the wise men in Matthew 2, they have made their way to Jerusalem and they are asking after this new baby, who has been born king of the Jews. The starry cosmos had already begun to spin and reveal the story of a new thing that was taking place on earth. The magi were known for having the ability to read the starry heavens. And read the heavens they do. The magi follow the star to Jerusalem.

And when they get there, they realize they are about 9 miles off the mark. They arrive in Jerusalem, but they still can't find the one who is born king of the Jews. And so, in what is perhaps a first in human history...these men stop and ask for directions. Oh yes indeed, women everywhere, here is a biblical mandate if I ever heard one...wise men DO ask for directions! But even Herod doesn't know how to direct them. In fact, he calls all the priests and biblical scholars in the area and tries to learn himself where the Messiah was to be born. The priests and scholars refer to Micah chapter 5 "But you, O Bethlehem...who are one of the little tribes of Judah, from you shall come forth...one who is to rule Israel."

This news is rather stunning. Bethlehem?! Small, rustic, not-so-important-or-even-very-interesting *Bethlehem*? Jerusalem is the place of kings and the Temple, riches and promise. Bethlehem is not ready for the greatness of one born king of the Jews. It seems that the Olympic Committee, or Messiah committee, or whatever investigative branch should have been "in the know" clearly didn't do its research in choosing Bethlehem. And yet, even here, things are being turned upside down. The kingdom of God is being revealed, and it is not at all what was expected. These unlikely foreign wanderers attune their ears to the prophet Micah and off they go, nine miles up the road, to search for the child in Bethlehem. Herod encourages them, saying, "search diligently for the child." It is ironic to me that Herod should be the one to offer these words. Search diligently for God. And the story tells us...don't necessarily search in palaces among the elite and powerful...but search in the dirty, impoverished, understated manger for a scandal-ridden family and a vulnerable child.

That is the first thing that comes to light in the story. If you are going along your way looking for God, remember the wise men and search diligently. Take the journey seriously. Realize it may take time. You may have some near misses. But ask for directions, listen to the prophets of our faith, and search for God among those people and places the world has rendered invisible, useless, and simple. God doesn't always, or even often, show up where we might expect.

And now I want to move to the second question—who shares in the journey? The wise men find Jesus, and scripture says they are overwhelmed with joy. The gradual awakening of this moment is discovering *who occupies the manger*. Like my own surprise on Mt. Sinai, the wise men discover that the reality they'd been seeking was, in fact, rather different from the reality they thought they knew. They came in search of the King of the Jews. What came to light is that this king of the Jews, was in fact, the King of *all* Creation, the Holy One, wonderful counselor, mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. And not only that, but the wise men were welcomed in...these pagan priests from foreign lands had been welcomed to gaze at the newborn God. In this Jewish child, old divisions are disintegrating...the kingdom of God is breaking in and breaking up the long-held views of who belonged on the inside of God's life, and who belonged on the outside. In this baby there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free. This is a moment of beauty...not only that these foreign men have made their way to pay homage to the newborn king, but that they've been invited in to join Mary and Joseph, the holy Jewish family, at the cradle of Christ. The wise men take their place in the great cloud of witnesses. It turns out their quest wasn't just a personal quest, but a pilgrimage to reveal God to the whole world. The wideness of God's mercy widens even further...the whole world is being invited to share in God's life. What comes to light in this Epiphany moment is the nativity scene...the joining together of Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, wise and simple.

And so the second part of the gradual unveiling is that the people who may accompany you on your journey to faith may not be those who you expected to join you along the way...you may look around to discover that your private mountaintop experience is instead shared by more far people than you'd been able to see when the night was darkened. God may give you unlikely traveling companions...look around...who are those people who you might be surprised are on the journey? Who are the people whose wisdom you cherish? Who are the

people who might not share your faith at all, but who show you God's love and generosity and compassion in a way that consistently catches you off guard? Look around. What is God doing in your midst, and who has he given you to help discover him?

So far, as we've looked at the story in Matthew 2, we've seen the wise men gradually discover precisely where they need to be, and who exactly they've come to see, and now we look to the third dimension of the story. At the end of this narrative, the story shifts to where *not* to go. The wise men started toward Bethlehem with instructions from Herod to "search diligently" and to then return to Herod after the child is found. The magi, wise though they may be, didn't realize they were being used by Herod, who had hatched a plan to kill all Jewish children under age two. But, when the wise men found Jesus, their encounter with him changed everything. They do not return to Herod, but scripture tells us they go home by another way. After lingering with the holy family, they see God for who he is, they see Herod for who he is, and they have a fundamental change of course. The well-known path is discarded...the connection to power and prestige dismissed...the wise men effectively repent of their relationship to King Herod, and align themselves with the Christ child. The wise men had been deeply attentive to this new baby. They'd made a long journey to meet this infant, and they were going to spend time gazing at the child who was about to turn the world upside down. It is an act of patience and hope. Looking at Jesus has the potential to change things. In fact, it can make you want to avert your eyes. Because paying attention to God and joining your life with his can disorient and reorient and set you on an altogether different journey. And the wise men *did* look. They didn't avert their eyes. And it seriously changed things. They pack their bags, say good riddance to the powers and principalities they knew, and journey home by another way.

And this is the third point. What comes to light here is that sometimes the path we know isn't always the path we ought to take. Sometimes the familiar path isn't the route that leads to life and flourishing. Sometimes encountering God means we are invited to take a different road...we may have a course correction...when we see the light, we see options and possibilities we may not have seen before. We are given freedom to risk the road less traveled, even with its fierce landscapes and uncharted paths, because the path is illuminated before us.

When we left Mt. Sinai after the sunrise experience, we too went down by a different route. We didn't take the well-marked stairs of penance, because the daylight allowed us to take an alternative path down the backside of the mountain. It was a path that was too difficult to navigate in the dark, but sunrise made it far more manageable. And although our trek up Sinai had felt largely solitary, and cold, and difficult...the gentle arrival of the sun gave us the freedom to chat with our new companions, warm our bodies, and to see clearly the new path ahead. Light does that.

As I was thinking about my own experience atop Mt. Sinai, I was brought back to lightning strikes. Because let's be honest, there are certain people in our faith, like, say, MOSES, whose own experience atop Mt. Sinai seemed to include lightning and thunder when he received the 10 commandments. God does speak to us in lightning strikes and dramatic gestures. But in the journey of wise men, we learn that sometimes revelation is soft and steady, like the arrival of light that comes with a sunrise. As you reflect on this story, and the wise men's gradual coming to know the true nature of the journey they took, what comes to light in you? I want to leave you with some questions:

- 1) Where are you searching for God?
- 2) Who else is searching with you?
- 3) Is it time to seek a less familiar path?

Amen.