

“Saving Light”
Isaiah 60: 1 – 6, Matthew 2: 1 – 12
West Swamp Mennonite Church # 1
January 1, 2017 – Epiphany

The Christmas story is full of activity. And there are lots of stopping places for reflection. There is Mary’s encounter with an angel and the difficult trip to Bethlehem. There are animals in a stable, shepherds in a field, and angels singing from the heavens. All of them pointing to the birth of Jesus, the Messiah.

Today, on this Epiphany Sunday, we have the last chapter of the Christmas story with still more stopping places on which to ponder. We have rich foreign wise men and a lengthy pilgrimage. We have political intrigue and a star that points the way. And finally we have worship fit for a king-to-be and three over-the-top gifts all presented to a baby boy named Jesus.

Epiphany is a funny word. It means an appearance or revelation; a sudden breaking in or illuminating realization, especially from the divine. It is a word that says God is giving us something new. In Christmas, God broke into the earth and gave us Jesus. On Epiphany God gives Jesus to be a light, not just to the Jews, but to the whole world! Just as Christmas is the celebration of Jesus coming to God’s people on earth, so Epiphany is

the celebration of Jesus coming to all peoples on earth – even to those who do not yet know him. It is always about Jesus.

And so it is really not about these interesting wise men. We wonder what clothes they wore, exactly how many there were, and where they really came from. We get fascinated by their strange customs and how they predicted the heavens. We wonder what route they really took and how long it took them. We marvel at their confidence; how they could just ride up to King Herod asking for the new king as though the whole world already knew Jesus existed. It is easy to get stuck on pondering the wise men, but the focus of Epiphany is not about the wise men. It is always about Jesus.

Epiphany is not even about the star despite its major role in pointing the way for the wise men. This light in the heavens was the special revelation that told the wise men a new king had been born in Judah. It is mentioned four times in the text and is one of the symbols of Epiphany.

There has also been a lot of scientific speculation about this star. Was it a comet, a supernova, or planets somehow coming together in the night sky? Perhaps we will never know exactly but what we know is that the star pointed the way to Jesus, the one fixed point in this story that is

always moving. The star points to this new king and savior and then, with its work done, fades from view. Because it is always about Jesus.

Epiphany is not really about the places either – like Jerusalem, Judea or Bethlehem. It is not about Arabia, Persia, or Babylon - possible homes for the wise men. Pulling from various Old Testament scriptures, Matthew just wants his Jewish hearers to understand that this Jesus is the Messiah, the Promised One. The places of promise are important in establishing scriptural precedence for what has happened – Jesus, the Savior has been born in Bethlehem.

Every place, both near and far, points to Jesus. It is always about Jesus, the saving light of the world.

Finally, Epiphany is not about the presents either – gold, frankincense, and myrrh or any other kind of gift we give for that matter. It is not about what these strange but lavish gifts might represent or what these “fit for a king” presents might symbolize. The wise men brought these presents to pay homage to the king – not Caesar, the high Roman Emperor, not the puppet king, Herob, or even the Jewish High Priest – But to Jesus. As Yale Divinity professor, Tom Troeger says, “Paying homage to Christ gives the story its purpose, its direction, and its culmination.”

These gifts of worship were ultimately directed to Jesus. Because, as we have said from the very beginning, it is always about Jesus.

One of my favorite faith writers, Barbara Brown Taylor, points to Jesus and says it well. “Jesus comes to bring God’s own light into the world, not to keep it for himself. He comes to set other people on fire, not to burn like a torch all on his own.” God comes down to give each of us the saving light of Jesus. From here she challenges the church: “What better time than the Epiphany of the Lord, after all, to ask a congregation to burn a little brighter?”

The Christmas story is all about Jesus. Epiphany is all about Jesus too. But we know Jesus comes to spread the saving light of God beyond himself to each of us. And so, as we begin a New Year, what better time to use this story about God breaking into our lives to ask ourselves, where is the fire of God breaking through to me? As we look forward to a New Year – our 300th anniversary no less, how might God be giving us something new? How might God be calling us to help this congregation burn a little brighter in our community? To pass on the saving light of Jesus. Oh, that Jesus might burn more brightly in all of our hearts. Amen.