

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
January 2, 2011
Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas 2, Year C

The T-shirt says “Three wise women would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, brought practical gifts, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and there would be peace on earth.” Well, I’m all for peace on earth, and maybe having these three women bustling around would have been exactly what Mary would have wanted. But it could also be the sort of thing that would try your patience: to go through childbirth and then have the stable rearranged so nothing was where you put it, and listening to the comments about whether your swaddling was too tight or your swaddling was too loose, or pressing you to eat more casserole, or taking the practical stuff when you just wish you had something beautiful for a change. It might be the sort of thing that would try the patience of a saint. Some new mothers want lots of people around helping, but Mary seems more like the keep-all-these-things-and-ponder-them-in-your-heart kind of girl. Mary may be the kind of girl who would rather just hold a newborn and gaze at him quietly, and cherish the time together.

So maybe God got it right sending the Magi. The Magi come with no agenda, no to-do lists. They come, really, to cherish the moment.

While it might seem that I’m dissing women here, I don’t actually think this is a gender issue at all. I don’t quite buy into the housewifey stereotypes the T-shirt suggests. Although that could partly be because I’m a 21st century American, we see this topic even in the Biblical account of Jesus visiting a different Mary, Mary of Bethany and her sister Martha, in which Mary wants to sit and listen to Jesus while Martha wants her to get busy in the kitchen. Make some casseroles! But Jesus says there are some things even more important than casseroles, and Mary has chosen the better part.

So the Magi appeal to me, and the Feast of the Epiphany, on which we celebrate their arrival, appeals to me. I love Christmas. But it can be too commercialized, and too busy, and too stressful. Come to think of it, a lot like the T-shirt women: cleaning, cooking, taking care of kids, rushing to get to places on time, getting the right practical gifts. Epiphany is a time that has a sense of wonder and holiness of Christmas without the commercialization and stress.

This week Marshall and I watched the movie *Up in the Air* which was a good movie partly because it starred George Clooney. But it was also a very carefully crafted movie which seems at first like a romantic comedy, and then takes the conventions of romantic comedy and cleverly turns them upside down to create a different genre that you might call a loneliness comedy. It is steered just barely away from being a loneliness tragedy. At one point, Ryan, the George Clooney character, is talking to a young coworker named Natalie who is asking him about his relationship with a beautiful woman.

Natalie asks, "Think there's any future there?"

Ryan replies. "Never thought about it."

"Really never thought about it?"

"No."

"How can you not think about these things? How does it not even cross your mind that you might want a future with somebody?"

He answers, "It's simple. You know that moment when you look into someone's eyes and you feel them looking right into your soul and the whole world goes quiet for a second?"

"Yes" she says.

"Right. Well, I don't."

It is a funny scene, and the layers of irony build up as the two of them go on to insult each other and open each other up. Underneath it all is the realization in Ryan that he does want that sense of connection with someone, that sense of quiet awe that a moment of real connection brings.

Because the sense of quiet awe that comes from genuine love changes us. When we look back on those moments it is the sense of awe and love that stays in our mind long after the details have faded. We might not be able to remember the facts: what was the name of that restaurant? When exactly did we go there? What food did we order? Those things don't matter anymore. The openness and adoration are the important part.

There are some sections of the New Testament that are very precise about details of place and time, but the story of the Magi isn't one of them. Where did they come from? Well, the East somewhere. Who were they exactly? Well, astrologers, kings, magi, something like that. There are three gifts mentioned, but does that necessarily mean that

there were three people bringing them? Maybe, maybe not. How long after the birth did it happen and were they living in a house then and if so where was it located? We don't know. The openness and adoration are the important part. All the rest? Well, whatever.

This is true not only for moments in our own lives, but also for moments in the lives of people we care about. We have a hard time keeping track of how long ago it was, but we remember what it felt like to be at that wedding, or at that funeral. I'm so glad you came, the hosts tell us, and we say, "I wouldn't have missed it for the world." That's the spirit that motivates the Magi, the sense that something special is happening, and you go not because you want to accomplish some task, but simply because you want to be there.

Annie Dillard writes, "I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam." That seems like a pretty good description of what the Magi want. They have traveled all that way because they want to be in the path of the beam of light. That quote applies to so much of a spiritual life. When we feel we are not as prayerful as we ought to be, that idea often comes from an expectation that prayer is supposed to be doing something or making something happen. If we don't feel very prayerful, then it seems we must not be doing a very good job. But prayer is not so much like starting a fire. It's more like soaking up the beams of the sun. You might want to take off your parka and your mittens and your winter hat, but you don't have to try to manufacture prayerful feelings. You just show up. The reason we come to church is that we cannot cause light, but we want to put ourselves in the path of God's beam of light.

I said that on Epiphany we celebrate the arrival of the Magi, and we do. But the real meaning of Epiphany is revelation. God is revealed to the whole world, even people from far away. And so Epiphany is an invitation for us too. It is a reminder that there is more to life than housework, and that each day is an opportunity for gratitude and wonder. It is an opportunity to stand in the beam of God's light. Epiphany reminds us to take in the beauty of the snowfall. It reminds us that when we look at the people in our lives, we can take our focus off their annoying flaws, and instead look at how beautiful they truly are. It reminds us that in church we can listen for how meaningful each particular word of the liturgy is, or that we can allow ourselves to be carried along by the sense of holiness of the entire experience of worship. Contemplatives say that if you approach it

with a sense of wonder and gratitude and sacredness, even doing menial tasks like housework can be full of joy. Who knew? God gives us beams of light all over the place, and Epiphany encourages us to go ahead and bask in them. We would be wise to take those opportunities. We might just discover some peace on earth.