

**Sermon for Morning Prayer:
The First Sunday after the Epiphany**

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

“Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian [MIDD-ee-unn] and Ephah [EE-fah], all they from Sheba [Shee-BAH] shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar [KEY-darr] shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth [*Knee*-BYE-oth] shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory. Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? Surely the isles shall wait for me, and the ships of Tarshish [TARR-shish] first, to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, unto the name of the LORD thy God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because he hath glorified thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the

king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

There is quite a difference between the way the wise men were led to Christ and the way the shepherds were led to Christ. By examining those different ways of coming to Christ, I believe we can learn something about evangelism. That is what I intend to do this morning. Let's begin with the shepherds.

These were rugged, hard working men with no education. They may have been homeless because they spent most of their time sleeping outdoors. They were certainly illiterate, so they learned what they knew about the Bible from hearing it read and expounded by rabbis in synagogues and by listening to their parents and others tell stories from memory.

These men needed very direct communication, and that's what they got. An angel appeared and told them that the Savior they were waiting and hoping for had

been born. They were told in general terms where to go and what to look for, but they were expected to fill in the details by their own knowledge and experience. Specifically they were told three things: The baby was wrapped in swaddling clothes (which are broad swaths of cloth), the baby was lying in a manger, and the manger was in The City of David.

Well, every Jew knew that Bethlehem was the City of David, the shepherds knew that a manger would be found in a stable, and they knew the location of the stables in Bethlehem. So off they went to find the Savior, and when they found him they did what everyone does when they find him. They went back to work with a different attitude “glorifying and praising God”, and “they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.”

The wise men, on the other hand, were sophisticated men of learning. They were astronomers, and part of their job was observing the movements of planets and stars. Their journey to Christ began when they noticed an especially bright new star in the western sky, possibly what we would call a supernova. As astrologers they took this as a sign that an important birth had taken place somewhere to the west of them. But where did it happen and why was it so important?

Well, these men had resources, and God expected them to use those resources. They could read. They knew how to conduct research, and they had access to a library, so they began to search the literature of nations to the west. In the writings of the Hebrews they found prophecies of a messianic king. They may also have gotten a clue from Jewish exiles who were servants in the royal household.

So off went the wise men to Israel, looking for a newborn king. The logical place to begin their search was the royal palace in Jerusalem but, to their surprise, King Herod knew nothing about any royal birth. He summoned his own wise men and they determined from the book of Micah that Bethlehem was the place where the Messiah would be born.

Well, the wise men from the East got directions to Bethlehem and when they set out they spotted that same star that they had seen back in their own country. It led them right to the house where Mary and Jesus were staying. And when they found them they did what wise men always do when they find Christ: They worshiped Him and they offered Him gifts.

But they still needed one direct revelation from God. King Herod was not to

be trusted. So rather than betray their newfound King, the wise men simply by passed Jerusalem and took another route home.

Now I said that we can learn something about evangelism by observing how each of these groups was led to Christ. The first thing to learn, I think, is that people are not all alike. People have different starting points and different needs. The first thing we need to do is determine what people already know about Christ and what they think about Him. The only way to know that is to ask them.

Sometimes people have very little knowledge about Jesus, and sometimes what they think they know is wrong and needs to be corrected. Sometimes they have had bad experiences with people who claim to be disciples. Sometimes they have simply never thought very much about how Christ could impact their lives for good. Whatever we learn by listening should tell us what people need to find their way to Christ, and that is what we must provide them with.

The second thing I believe we can learn is to respect people's intelligence. Don't treat people like children unless they are children, and even then it's a good thing to allow them to think things through and find out some things on their own. You want to guide people's thinking, but you don't want to overwhelm them with information they are not ready for or do not need to have given to them.

Finally, I think we can learn by comparing these two stories that Christ is very gracious. He accepts people as they come to him and does not insist that there is only one way. The shepherds came in their dirty, smelly, work clothes and found Christ in a stable. They were welcome.

The wise men came in their professional attire, bearing expensive gifts, and found Christ in a proper house. They too were welcome.

Everyone is welcome, and everyone is welcome to find his own way, using whatever guidance his own resources do not provide. Some people need angels, and we must deal with them as the angels dealt with the shepherds. Some people need stars, and for them we must be like stars. Whatever people need to find their way to Christ, that is what we must provide. And that is what I think we can learn by comparing side by side the story of Christmas and the story of Epiphany.

--oo0oo--

January 10, 2010
St. David's Anglican Church
Charlottesville, Virginia