

Angels, Dreams and Us

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA 23452
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Our story today is a familiar one and that is one of the challenges of writing a sermon for today. We all know the story about the wise men so how do we tease something new out of this. Well yes we know the story, but how well do you know the story. One thing that I do when faced with a familiar story is to spend some time with the story and see what word or image emerges. What really strikes me this Christmas season is that I am very aware of the appearances of angels and the importance of dreams to the entire story. As I was preparing to be Joseph on Christmas Eve I found myself writing, "Once again angels you may not believe this but I (speaking as Joseph) believe because of the angels."

This morning again we find ourselves in the world of dreams and prophesy. This is a world that our modern world neither understands, nor respects any longer. Unfortunately we live in a world that discounts, even discards epiphanies, dreams or angelic pronouncements of almost any type, but especially ones of a religious nature. Just superstition many would say. I say, wait just a moment. How many times when we pray do we ask God for a hint as to what we should do. So why when that hint appears are we so skeptical?

This whole line of thinking got started as I was cooking at the stove and Wendy was talking to a member of her parish who had an incredible dream about Good Samaritan and where they are headed. Wendy was very excited and told her member, write everything down you remember and meditate on it for the next week. See if anything else comes to mind. This could easily have been an important epiphany a message about the future of that parish.

Now the word epiphany means much more than just a church festival and while that is the first definition in the dictionary there are two others. An appearance or manifestation especially of a deity. A sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience.¹

The wise men came looking for what they thought was a king at least according to Matthew, but they were thinking in conventional terms. It is always dangerous to constrict Jesus to what we expect in our human terms. The Magi however both sought out and embraced this mystery of God incarnate. Now I am not talking about mystery as a puzzle to be solved, but something important to be revealed. That is why we call this day Epiphany. The wisemen were not looking for God in the flesh. They were looking for

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epiphany?s=t>

a great leader of some sort. The Magi got far more than they bargained for in this revelation of God made man.

Again remember that Matthew is writing this account long after the events occurred, in fact some 30 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. He knew that not only the King Herod who was king at the time of the birth of Jesus, but also that a different Herod who was King during Jesus' crucifixion had viewed him as a threat to his power. As Matthew was writing the majority of Jews rejected Matthew's claims about Jesus.

So in Matthew the first people to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah are Gentiles! They are considered to be outside the favor of God. Even worse they are astrologers. Astrology was frowned upon if not flat out outlawed by the Torah. So while probably powerful and even wealthy, look at the gifts they bring, these astrologers no matter how many are most definitely outsiders. This is very important to Matthew in his writing to persuade the Jewish world to follow Jesus. For remember that is a driving force behind the accounts that Matthew includes in his gospel. This is why there are some stories, like the wise men that are unique to his account. They were important to his argument and not that important to the other three gospel writers.

Wise men had been vigilant in their studies. They paid attention to prophesy and to signs around them. They put that knowledge into action. They asked directions, sought guidance along the way and continued to be open to revelation even after they had found what they were looking for. Their openness was not ended when they found Jesus. They had a dream to go with the prophesies that they had worked out by their study of ancient texts and stars. They too had a dream. In that dream they are told to go home by another way and to avoid Herod.

They were the first to learn an important lesson about following Christ. Once you have encountered Jesus Christ the old paths no longer work. You must continue but by a different path. The Magi were profoundly affected by their encounter and I truly would have loved to be a traveling companion with them as they headed home by a different path. There is nothing in Matthew's account about what they thought or what they did after leaving Bethlehem. Maybe next year I'll work on that for my Epiphany sermon. That however might be something you might meditate on. Put yourself in the company of the Magi and try to imagine what it might have been like. Maybe God will have a message for you in that meditation.

That really brings me to the point of what I have been praying about and trying in part to teach over the last several months. God does speak to us, each and every one of us. Some people and sadly I am afraid the number is small take the time to listen to these messages. The stories surrounding Christmas every year center around those people who chose to listen and then to accept and act on the message that God had given them. I asked on the last Sunday of Advent if you had ever considered if Mary was the only one asked or if she was the one who finally said yes to God's request to bear Jesus?

Maybe, just maybe Gabriel started in the royal court and worked his way down the social ladder being turned down time and again by those too busy, without enough faith or just plain deaf to the working of the Spirit to say yes. Maybe Gabriel had to get all the way down to a poor teenage girl to serve as the mother of God. We certainly know from scripture that those who listen often are not overjoyed to be called to serve God. Serving God is rarely easy and to be honest it tends to be expensive in a variety of ways. However in that service is a peace and a reward far more valuable than any material gift, power or reward. It is a risk and I suppose that is where the resistance is.

When God speaks we like the Magi, often have to take a different path. We are called out of our comfort zone. However we are called out of that comfort zone with the knowledge that God will be with us for the journey. So take some time to actively listen to God. Do more than just read the story. Try some of the techniques I have given you to meditate on scripture and see to what or where God is calling you.