

Epiphany Sunday
The Epiphany of Jesus Christ
Columbia Congregational Church
January 6, 2018

Seeking (aka "Coddiwompling")
Sermon by the Reverend Betsey Polglase

When I was growing up in the Willow Grove Presbyterian Church in Scotch Plains NJ I loved the music and the pageantry of Christmas. I once got to be Mary and, in fact, that is the only pageant I remember although I am certain we had one every year. When my girls were growing up and we were visiting my parents in Cornwall, my father was always one of the kings/wise men. He took great pleasure in processing all dressed up and singing what ever verse was his of We Three Kings, giving my daughters and me a wink as he passed by. That church continues to have members of all ages involved in their pageant.

So when I became a minister and realized that scripture has the Wise Men coming not to the stable but to a house and they did not stand with the shepherds and the angels, I was faced with a dilemma. Our tradition has conflated the story of the birth and the story of the wise men's arrival in Bethlehem. But then what to do about Epiphany Sunday celebrated 12 days after Christmas. There are some traditions that celebrate the feast day of Three Kings in a bigger way than they do Christmas. The Epiphany is the revelation of the divine nature of Jesus. Now that is to be celebrated.

So our children have to wait to bring the camels and the Kings to the Nativity Scene and this Sunday we consider the story of these kings, Wiseman, or astrologers or however you choose to call these first Gentiles to recognize the Christ child as the Messiah.

The gospel text immediately puts us in context. We are in the reign of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Scholars in the East had witness a bright star that, in their wisdom, signaled the birth of a king, the King of the Jews. Not knowing where the baby was born, they traveled toward Jerusalem, since it was the capital of the Jewish community, seeking the place where the baby could be found.

Now I have learned a new word that seems to fit these travelers so well. Perhaps you have seen it, as I did, on Facebook recently. The word is “coddiwomple”. It is a verb in English slang. You won't find it in the traditional dictionaries but it is in the “Urban Dictionary.” The definition is “to travel purposefully toward an as-yet-unknown destination.”

Well now, I see the Wise Men coddiwompling toward where Jesus, the king of Israel, would be. In fact, I don't think I will ever look on this story quite the same way as I once did: a stately procession of three men dressed in beautiful robes and crowns bringing gifts to the newborn king.

We don't even truly know how many there were, but likely more than three and they would have traveled with an entourage or caravan with servants and supplies.¹ These astrologers had the ability to read the stars and interpret their meaning and therefore were highly regarded and so most likely had regal attire. They set out seeking the baby without knowing where they would find him. Scripturally there is no indication that the star led them to Jerusalem. Only after Herod sent them toward Bethlehem based on the Prophet's proclamation, did the bright star again appear, stopping over the place where Jesus was. “At the end of their journey, [their

¹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Exegetical Perspective, Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol. 1*, 213.
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coddiwompling], these wise men from the East discover a truth that transcends all others – their seeking is both honored and rewarded.”²

In the gospel of Matthew, the disciples, and we as well, are encouraged to seek truth, which even today is contrary to accepting what we are told or what the powerful proclaim. We are all seekers and only by seeking – coddiwompling- do we find our way to the manger and fall to our knees to offer ourselves to Jesus. It is there that we discover all are welcome – poor shepherds, exotic strangers from another land, or long time seekers of a place and time when we rejoin our creator.

Eugene Peterson, who wrote the biblical paraphrase read to us this morning, uses Frederick Nietzsche’s phrase in describing Christian life as “a long obedience in the same direction.”³ There is a sense of perseverance, of accepting the Christ -like discipline for the long term, trusting that in time we will indeed reach our destination, wherever and when ever that is.

Today we enter the season of Epiphany, a period in the church calendar when we read scriptures about revelations or appearance of the Divine and ponder their meaning for us. Does the light of God break into our world, still? Are there “encounters with God – in community, in nature, in relationships, and in our own hearts” – even in the 21st century?⁴ I believe so. We just need to be watchful and searching for such revelations and not limit them by our own expectations.

Simeon and Anna, both devout Jews, rejoiced when, in their old age and a life-time of serving in the temple, they finally looked upon the baby brought to the temple to be presented to the Lord, according to the law of

² Stephen Bauman, Pastoral Perspective, Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 1, 214

³ homileticonline , *Adoration of the Magi, Matthew 2: 1-12, 1/6/2013.*

⁴ Stephen Bauman, *ibid.*

Moses. They both proclaimed this child to be the savior and redeemer of Israel. This was the one they have been waiting for, even staying alive for. The Apostle Paul too stayed faithful in good times and in bad, for the long haul. As he neared death he wrote, “I have fought the good fight, ...finished the race, [and]... kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). From the moment of his conversion, Paul spent a life of discipleship.

St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, claims “our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee...O Lord.” Throughout our lives, we continue to seek, to coddiwomple, to travel purposefully toward an as-yet-unknown destination, often going places and doing work we never imagined we would do, trusting in God’s help throughout our lives until our pilgrimage is done. Like the Magi, when we encounter the divine, we are changed forever and can never go back to who we were before.

Let us pray:

Radiant Star, sign of the One who came that we might be saved, and travels with us through this life, grace us with both perseverance and peace as we seek the way of faithful discipleship. Amen.