

## Jan 8, 2023 Epiphany

Pr. Steve

Texts: Isaiah 60: 1-6, Ephesians 3: 1-12, Matthew 2: 1-18

In the name of God, Abba-Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy Epiphany!

Some generations ago, a young man traversed the whole of Asia to meet the master martial artist of his time. Upon finally arriving, he asked the Great One,

*"How long will it take for me to master the arts that you teach?"*

*"10 years,"* said the martial artist.

*"What if I work twice as hard as everybody else?"* said the young man.

*"20 years,"* said the artist.

*"What if I work, day and night, three times as hard as everyone else?"*

*"30 years,"* said the martial artist.

*"How can that be?"* said the young man.

*"Because,"* said the Great One, *"you have one eye trapped on your destination, and that leaves you only one eye with which to look for the Way."*

How often aren't we damned and determined to get what we want. And a whole society encourages us, *'Don't stop. Don't quit. Go for it!'* And we lose our way. We often have no access to the Way--and come to believe it doesn't exist.

Matthew spends his entire first chapter in the Gospel of Matthew in a genealogy proving, proving to the world, the credibility, the lineage, the purity of Jesus. And then he includes within it four women, one of whom is a foreigner--you can't be a foreigner, and have pureblood in Judaism!--and the other three women are either no repute, or ill repute. Why did he just do this?

Joseph was a righteous man, a conscientious man, a responsible man. And it comes to him in a dream: *'Abandon what you know. Take this woman and child (though they are not yours). Take them to yourself and protect them.'*

How was it that Joseph, a good and conscientious man, could abandon what he knew to make that choice? His wisdom eyes were open. He wasn't locked into just his own destination.

Here's briefly the pattern of Wisdom, which we get from the Gospel today. Wise ones somewhere were open to possibilities, studying stars—astrologers, astronomers, whatever combination. They were looking for something beyond themselves, and they were intrigued when they saw something in the sky. Not only that--they made the journey to find out what it is. They committed themselves. That's the big gap, isn't it, in our lives constantly. Great ideas come all the time. Do we go with those? Do we follow through? What does it take to commit to something which intrigues us... but we may not know what it's all about...yet.

On the way they stopped in Jerusalem, the power center, authority center, assuming that's where wisdom leads. That must obviously be the destination, right? I mean today they'd come to Washington D.C because 'those people have their act together, and they know what's going on in the world.' Well, at least they'd go to New York, or San Francisco--but they're redirected to Winnemucca [Nevada]. (Can anything good come from Winnemucca?)

When they arrive, all it says is, they went to the child, and they paid homage. They simply wanted to be in the presence of that child, of that being. They needed to be there and be with him.

I trust many of you have had moments like that in life. It seems they're incredibly fleeting, and so rare. But now and then, in a most surprising way--through family, children, strangers, nature--suddenly we are a part. It is not some other state removed far from here, some ecstatic zone. It is the deepest connection of the heart.

That's what wisdom wants to cultivate in us, because that is when we are our truest selves--we don't have to be somebody else. We know everything is right with the universe (and I see heads nodding). For a few moments, we know we belong. We know it. That's what the gospel wants for us.

And then the Wise Ones, in another dream, were warned to return home by another route. That's the thing about Wisdom. You can never go home the

same way. You cannot go back the way you came. 'Push it--20 years.'  
'Push it harder-- 30 years.'

There are consequences to Wisdom. Herod understood full well as a tyrant that he was threatened—(When will we learn that most people in power really are cowards?)--terrified of two-year-olds, dispatching troops to massacre [them].

And we have plenty of examples in our own time. The Bible is not ancient. It is so bloody current. From Herod to Pilate, to be with Jesus brings consequences. And Joseph--this most remarkable figure, about whom we know virtually nothing--is then warned in a dream '*Flee with the child to Egypt, the land of oppression from which your people came. Flee as a refugee.*' Because the gospel understands: every human being is human, and in need of God's care, and ours. This is not up for debate. Ask Refugee Jesus.

Wisdom asks us to keep both eyes open--but it places us in a bind. Going all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, in their mid-late70s: '*I'm sending you off now to a new destination. You don't know where it is. You don't know the outcome. Just go.*' Wisdom. Intrigued enough to follow?

The prophets, again and again and again, summoned to speak clear, harsh words to their own people for the sake of their vitality. Jeremiah warned at the very beginning of his calling "*And nobody will pay attention to you... Will you answer my call?*"

So today, John the Baptist, thought he'd given his all, ends up in prison, sends disciples to ask '*Are you the One? Am I mistaken? What's gone wrong here?*'

And Jesus says, '*Friend, it's not about retribution. It is not about mean, little power games. It is about reconciliation, the reconciling of Heaven and Earth. It's about the many-faceted sides of the wisdom of God--that endless, vast, wisdom and mystery, which persists on bringing us together.*'

Mary, in her own time a devout person, a woman of courage, and she's asked to have a birth out of wedlock. She says, 'Yes'. Wisdom eyes open, not knowing where the story will lead. Do you think she felt especially religious at that moment? '*Oh, this is what it is to be sacred. Now, I get it!!*'

Joseph, drawn to protect the family (which certainly diminished his reputation) and flee for their lives as refugees for several years. Does he say, *'Now I get it. This is what it's like to lead a spiritual life. I feel so much better now'?*

In closing, three stories trying to share the dance of, perhaps, how the Wisdom mystery works among us.

Several years ago, 20 plus, a Lutheran pastor was attacked by our national Lutheran church body, the ELCA, because he'd come out of the closet--and that just wasn't allowed back in the 90's. So, there was a full church trial--people from across United States coming to judge this man, and he chose Pastor Lucy as his defense attorney. Now, let's be clear, Pastor Lucy hasn't one ounce of legal training in her body--and she defended him magnificently. I'll also tell you that Ross Merkel, the pastor, was kind of a mean guy. Personally, I didn't like him--he was always sarcastic. But after he came out of the closet, he became a human being. It was a pleasure to be with him. He could laugh, he found joy in life, and even though persecuted by our church body, he became human.

The trial went on for about 10 days. In middle of it, on Sunday afternoon, we had a celebration, in his church in Oakland. I helped create the event. As I arrived, some friends from that congregation (lay members), we happened to bump into each other. They said, 'Are you doing anything today, Steve?' I said, 'Yeah, I am.' They said, *'Oh good. Something's going to happen!'*

And that's the first thing I want to say about Wisdom, is it makes a difference. You know, I'm willing to be out there and all that kind of stuff. I'm not trying to say that about me. I'm trying to say, it makes a difference. There are consequences. Things get disturbed--joyfully or painfully--but when Wisdom shows up something better change in the house.

But I also want to say, I've been privileged in my life to know people of profound depth, who at the core of their being--and some of you are among them--simply live from that place of homage and worship, and they are praying to cultivate, always, that sense of connection with the presence which makes us whole. And it is also upon these people, usually incognito, (they can be in the center or not, that doesn't matter) that the spirit of

Wisdom is working among us. And we need to remember to thank God for them.

Last story--again, 20 years ago, I don't recall, Thanksgiving Eve service, an interfaith celebration, happened to be at Beth Chaim. I was the last person to speak at the conclusion of that program. I remember it was something about hunger (obviously, a common theme for Thanksgiving), not only hungry for food, but I'm sure I said something about *hungering for the reality of life, and to bless people wherever they are, with whatever their needs*. The service concluded. I was heading back to the reception. 3-4 people came forward and stopped me, asked if they could share a moment. I said, 'Yes.' I'd never met them before, learned quickly that these three were refugees, one from Syria, I think the other [from] Afghanistan, and somebody from Central America. And they stood there before me, speaking in their own native tongues. And said, as the translator made it clear to me afterwards, '*We don't understand English. We don't understand any of the words you said tonight, but we heard your words... here. And we thank you.*' All we could do is gaze at each other--three wise ones in need of wisdom.

May we keep our wisdom eyes open.  
Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.