

Mother Betsy  
Epiphany\_B  
January 4, 2015

“This Little Light of Mine ...”

When I began thinking about the meaning of Epiphany as the revelation of God in the Christ-child and the journey of the three Magi, I thought of the gospel song, “This Little Light of Mine” because we often sang it at my former parish, the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia, on the Feast of the Epiphany. And, I began wondering why this song was chosen for celebration of this feast day there.

The light in the song refers to an inner light, obviously – ‘this little light of mine’ -, but the prominent light on this feast day comes from the light of the star which the three Magi followed to the birthplace of a new ‘king of the Jews’. So theologically, the Epiphany liturgy of St. Thomas transferred the light that led to Christ to the light that is within us. This may seem like a short-cut to some, ie, how do we get from the light of a star in the sky to the light of Christ within us; but for people who are trying to define themselves in terms of the Christ within them, and not by how others have, perhaps by the color of their skin, transferring the meaning of the light that led other outsiders to Christ to the light within, gives a clarity to the seeming short-cut which the song expresses so well. It is helped give me clarity of today's Gospel reading. And, indeed, we all can benefit from this understanding of the light of the star that leads to Christ as the same light that is within us.

The light reveals God in Christ which is the Epiphany. And, it is particularly illuminating, forgive my pun, if we focus on the Magi who follow the star. These guys are outsiders. They are not Jews, but from ‘the East’, probably, Persia, modern-day Iran, where they were probably closer to being magicians than Christian tradition wanted them to be, hence, they were made into kings whom we sing about in the hymn ‘We Three Kings of Orient Are’.<sup>1</sup> They weren't holy men, but they were spiritual men, men who were seeking truth, who found meaning in the stars. Today we would call them astrologists. But, as all of us who don't admit to reading our horoscopes know, astrology is not a reputable study, and neither were the Magi considered so by the padristics who created the liturgy for Epiphany that we still follow. But, Matthew our Gospel writer thought they were very significant in who they were. He didn't try to make them out to be something other than who they were because he was trying to make the point that even outsiders could find the light of Christ. That God could break into any belief to lead to God's revelation. And, so Matthew presents the first believers in the new ‘king of the Jews’ as outsiders, and not those who have already professed a belief in God. The Magi are those to whom Isaiah of our reading this morning, says ‘Arise shine, for your light has come’. The prophet is talking about the light of God in the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the return of the Jews from exile from Babylon, but Matthew recognized that the light of the God of Isaiah was still shining in the sky, and not just in the sky, but inside of us, and leading all of us, those who believe and those who are seeking, to the rebuilding of the kingdom of God.

Matthew helps us to see that Jesus can be found and exalted by anyone, not just by we who are ordained, serve faithfully, are ‘cradle Episcopalians’ or life-long practicing Christians, *but, by anyone who seeks the truth about who God is*. This is good news for those who question our faith. I was unchurched for much of my adult life, wandering in the wilderness of beliefs, questioning the validity of Christianity. I wondered how a good person like Mahatma Ghandi would not find salvation in heaven

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<sup>1</sup> D. Mark Davis. *Left Behind and Loving It: Living As If God's Steadfast Love Really Does Endure Forever*. “Stars and Prophets in Alignment”. January 1, 2015. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/01/stars-and-prophets-in-alignment.html>. World-wide web. January 3, 2015.

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because he was not a Christian. Matthew's Gospel text tells me differently. Matthew was telling those of his ancient Jewish Christian community that it doesn't matter how you seek God, but *do seek God*. For all parents who fear for the salvation of their children who have ceased attending Church, who question *your* belief, or who profess belief that isn't recognizable to you as faith, I will tell you to cease fretting. They are Magi, seekers of truth in their own way. This text says that all ways to the revelation of God are legitimate. No questions asked.<sup>2</sup> Matthew does not question the validity of following a star, but legitimizes the light of Christ that the Magi found.

And, in seeking Jesus the Magi found the light within. In their visit to Herod, whom the Roman Emperor had named 'king of the Jews', they had no problem confronting Herod with their knowledge that they were being led to another king of the Jews. This was Matthew's first sample of speaking truth to power. Without an inkling of fear, they confronted Herod's power that had turned to the Romans against God with *their* knowledge of God gained by the *light* of God they were following without *being of God*. They were seekers of the truth of the light regardless where it led them.

And, they were accepting of the truth as they found it. In seeking the truth of God who is the Christ-child, we must be prepared to accept who we find. The Magi didn't question that the king they found was a baby. They honored and exalted him in the knowledge of who he was. Likewise, we can't make the baby into someone we want him to be, but must accept who he is: a lowly born child. We must accept that he became a man who spoke to power without fear. A man, God Incarnate, who died that we might find salvation from all things that turn us away from the revelation of God. We must be willing to accept God's revelation as Jesus Christ to recognize the light of the star that led us to him, and the light of him that lives within us. Accepting the truth of the light of the star, also, means giving him the very best of ourselves, that which represents the frankincense, myrrh and gold of our lives, even if that best is our brokenness, knowing as our Savior, Jesus is worthy of our praise.

Through our praise of Christ, we shine the light within, regardless of how we define it. After worshiping the new king, the Magi protected the truth from the evil Herod had planned and continued home, presumably seeking truth in other places. Matthew does not tell us that they accepted Jesus as their ultimate truth<sup>3</sup>, but that the light of God shined in them because they kept God's truth in God's revelation as Christ.

The Feast of the Epiphany is for all, not just for those who believe. It is an equal opportunity for all who seek God's truth, through whatever means, to find it and to praise God for giving everyone the way to find the light within themselves. It is God's grace that the light of the star becomes the light within us, and that we shine our light in the world. We who are believers say it is the light of Christ, and so it is for us. In the letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul said that the charge given to us the Church is that '... the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known ... [because] we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.' We proclaim<sup>4</sup> the light of God, letting it shine from us, out to the 'nations of the world', with full faith that it is available to be revealed to all who seek God's truth however it is that God defines it. And, this is the Epiphany. Amen.

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Brueggemann, Walter, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome. Eds. *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*. “Epiphany: Ephesians 3:1-12”. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. 1993. pp. 92-93.