

Luke 3: 15-22

IT NEVER CEASES TO AMAZE ME HOW QUICKLY CHRISTMAS DISAPPEARS. WHAT TOOK MONTHS IN COMING, PREPARING, WAITING, ANTICIPATING, SEEMS TO BE OVER IN AN INSTANT. RETAILERS BEGAN THEIR PREPARATIONS LITERALLY THREE MONTHS EARLIER. AND THEN IN A MATTER OF DAYS IT IS GONE ALTOGETHER. HARDLY A TRACE. AND, AS A MATTER OF FACT, IF YOU LOOK CAREFULLY, YOU CAN SEE THE FIRST HEARTS OF VALENTINE'S DAY BEGIN TO EMERGE.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE MOMENTS, AND FAVORITE CHRISTMAS MEMORIES, IS THAT TIME ON CHRISTMAS EVE, AT THE END OF THE CANDLELIGHT SERVICE, WHEN EACH PERSON IN THE SANCTUARY LIGHTS A SMALL CANDLE AND THEN PASSES THE LIGHT ON DOWN THE PEW TO HIS/HER NEIGHBOR. THE DARKENED SANCTUARY FILLS WITH THE MOST BEAUTIFUL LIGHT, AND UP HERE IN THE CHANCEL I SEE SOMETHING MOST OF YOU CAN'T. EACH FACE IS SHINING. THE FACE OF EVERY MAN, WOMAN, CHILD IS SUDDENLY ILLUMINATED...LITERALLY SHINING---AND IT IS SUCH A PICTURE, A SANCTUARY FULL OF BEAUTIFUL SHINING FACES.

THE BIBLE SAYS THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE ENCOUNTER GOD: THEIR FACES SHINE. WHEN MOSES MET GOD ON MOUNT SINAI AND CAME BACK DOWN, HE FRIGHTENED EVERYONE BECAUSE HIS FACE WAS SHINING. HE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IT, BUT HIS ENCOUNTER WITH GOD MADE HIS FACE SHINE.

"RISE, SHINE, YOUR LIGHT HAS COME," THE PROPHET ISAIAH WROTE. THE PEOPLE WERE IN EXILE, UNDER HOUSE ARREST ESSENTIALLY, IN BABYLON, MILES FROM HOME. THEY HAD BEEN THERE FOR A GENERATION. IT LOOKED LIKE THEY WOULD NEVER GO HOME. IT WAS A TIME OF DEEP AND THICK DARKNESS. "RISE, SHINE," THE PROPHET WRITES TO THEM. "GOD IS ABOUT TO DO A NEW THING. YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES ARE ABOUT TO CHANGE, AND YOUR FORTUNES ARE ABOUT TO DRAMATICALLY IMPROVE. THERE'S LIGHT NOW IN THE DARKNESS. BUT YOU CAN'T JUST CONTINUE TO SIT THERE MOPING, FEELING SORRY FOR YOURSELF. IT'S TIME TO STAND UP, GET READY TO MOVE; TIME TO TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE AGAIN. YOU ARE NO LONGER HELPLESS VICTIMS. THERE IS LIGHT IN YOUR DARKNESS, AND IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO SHINE."

THAT'S THE MESSAGE OF EPIPHANY, THE TIME AFTER CHRISTMAS, THE TIME FOR FACES TO SHINE BECAUSE WE HAVE SEEN A STAR. IT IS THE DAY OF THE FIRST STAR FOLLOWERS, THE MAGI. THEY WERE PRIESTLY ASTROLOGERS FROM THE EAST...PERSIA (MODERN IRAN) BABYLON (IRAQ), ARABIA (SAUDI ARABIA). WE CALL THEM WISE MEN AND SOMETIMES KINGS. THEY WERE ACTUALLY SCHOLARS. THEY STUDIED THE STARS, AND WHEN THEY SAW SOMETHING NEW IN THE HEAVENS, THEY TRACKED IT DOWN TO SEE WHAT IT MEANT. THEY BELIEVED IMPORTANT EVENTS WERE ANNOUNCED BY THE STARS. THEY WERE NOT KINGS, BUT KINGS DID CONSULT WITH THEM BECAUSE OF THEIR KNOWLEDGE.

THERE ARE SEVERAL IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT THE STORY THAT ARE A WORD FOR US THIS MORNING. THE FIRST IS THAT THESE MEN WERE OUTSIDERS, NON-JEWS IN A JEWISH STORY. THESE ARE GENTILES, PAGANS, NOT PART OF THE CHOSEN PEOPLE, HERE AT THE VERY BEGINNING. MATTHEW INTRODUCES JESUS BY WAY OF A STORY THAT SHATTERS RELIGIOUS

TRADITION AND BRINGS STRANGERS, OUTSIDERS, THE OTHER, INTO THE SPOTLIGHT. IT IS HERE AT THE BEGINNING, AND BEFORE THE STORY IS OVER, JESUS WILL SHATTER ALL THE OLD BOUNDARIES OF RELGION AND RACE AND SOCIAL CLASS AND STATUS. BEFORE THE STORY IS OVER ALL THE OUTSIDERS..THE MARGINAL, THE SINNERS, THE UNCLEAN, LEPERS, TAX COLLECTORS, PROSITITUES, POOR PEOPLE, WOMEN, CHILDREN, FOREIGNERS, ROMAN CENTURIONS, ALL OF THEM OUTSIDERS..WILL BE PART OF THE STORY, WILL BE WELCOMED AND INCLUDED IN HIS COMPANY, WELCOME AT THIS TABLE. JESUS DOESN'T KNOW THE MEANING OF THE WORD "OUTSIDER" AND IT BEGINS HERE AT THE MANGER WITH THE MAGI.

JANUARY 6, EPIPHANY IS THEIR DAY, THE DAY TRADITION ASSIGNS TO THEIR ARRIVAL IN BETHLEHEM, AND IT IS CELEBRATED IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCHES WITH GREAT FESTIVITIES AND POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE. IN MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD, EPIPHANY IS A BIGGER HOLIDAY THAN CHRISTMAS, WITH RITUALS OF GIFT GIVING TIED TO TREASURE-BEARING WISEMEN INSTEAD OF A JOLLY FAT MAN IN A RED SUIT. IN SOME PLACES, CHILDREN LEAVE SHOES FILLED WITH HAY OUTSIDE THEIR HOMES. THE HAY IS FOR THE CAMELS OF THE WISE MEN, WHO LEAVE GIFTS FOR THE CHILDREN IN THE SHOES AS THANKS BEFORE RESUMING THEIR JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM.

THE MAGI ARE THE FIRST GENTILES TO RECOGNIZE THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH. THINK ABOUT THIS FOR A MINUTE. ALTHOUGH THE SCRIBES COULD EXPLAIN WHERE THE MSSIAH SHOULD BE BORN, THEY REMAINED QUITE UNPERTURBED IN JERUSALEM. THEY DID NOT ACCOMPANY THE WISE MEN TO SEEK HIM. SIMILARLY WE MAY KNOW THE WHOLE OF CHRISTIANITY, YET MAKE NO *MOVEMENT*. THE POWER THAT MOVED HEAVEN AND EARTH LEAVUS US COMPLETELY UNMOVED. ELEVEN DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS AND WE ARE UNMOVED? UNCHANGED?

THE THREE KINGS HAD ONLY A RUMOR/HERESAY TO GO BY. BUT IT MOVED THEM TO MAKE THAT LONG JOURNEY. THE SCRIBES WERE MUCH BETTER INFORMED, MUCH BETTER VERSED. THEY SAT AND STUDIED THE SCRIPTURES LIKE SO MANY PEOPLE DO, BUT IT DID NOT MAKE THEM MOVE. WHO HAD MORE TRUTH? THE THREE MAGI WHO FOLLOWED THE RUMOR, OR THE SCRIBES WHO REMAINED SITTING WITH THEIR KNOWLEDGE?

WERE THE MAGI FRUSTRATED BY THE SCRIBES WHO GAVE THEM THE NEWS THEY WANTED AND THEN REMAINED QUIET IN JERUSALEM? DID THE MAGI THINK THEY WERE BEING MOCKED? AFTER ALL, THE SCRIBES HAD THE KNOWLEDGE YET REMAINED STILL. THIS IS AS BAD AS IF A PERSON KNOWS ALL ABOUT JESUS AND HIS TEACHINGS, AND YET THEIR OWN LIFE EXPRESSES THE OPPOSITE. EVER HEARD OF SUCH A THING? WHEN THEY SAW THE CHILD, EVERYTHING CHANGED FOR THEM. THEY WERE TRANSFORMED. THEY HAD TO ALTER THEIR PLANS, GO HOME BY A DIFFERENT ROAD. THEY WERE OVERWHELMED WITH JOY WHEN THEY SAW THAT STAR HAD STOPPED OVER THE PLACE WHERE THE CHILD WAS. I LIKE TO THINK THAT THEIR FACES WERE SHINING, THOSE WISE, OLD ASTROLOGERS WHO KNEW SO MUCH AND WHO THOUGHT THEY HAD SEEN EVERYTHING THERE WAS TO SEE. I LIKE TO THINK BECAUSE THEY HAD DECIDED TO FOLLOW THE STAR, THEIR FACES SHINED.

WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE THEY DID IT IN THE FIRST PLACE, PACKED UP AND LISTENED TO THE HERESAY OF THE SCHOLARS? THEY DIDN'T KNOW HOW OR WHERE IT WOULD END, WITH ONLY THE LIGHT OF A STAR TO LEAD THEM. WERE THEY BORED WITH THE STATUS QUO, IMPATIENT WITH THE WAY THINGS WERE IN THE WORLD? DID THEY FOLLOW THE STAR TO PROVE SOMETHING? OR DID THEY FOLLOW THE STAR BECAUSE THEY WERE PEOPLE OF RELENTLESS HOPE WHO WERE ALWAYS HUNGRY FOR, WATCHING FOR, STRIVING FOR A WORLD BETTER THAN THIS ONE, A WORLD AS GOD INTENDS IT TO BE, A WORLD WHERE KINDNESS AND COMPASSION ARE REALITIES INSTEAD OF POWER, PREJUDICE, HATRED AND VIOLENCE?

STAR FOLLOWERS ARE PEOPLE OF RELENTLESS HOPE. STAR FOLLOWERS MOVE. STAR FOLLOWERS ARE PEOPLE OF HOPE WHO DO NOT GIVE INTO THE TEMPTATION OF RESIGNATION. THEY ARE PEOPLE WHOSE FACES SHINE WITH HOPE.

THAT'S WHAT A CHURCH IS, A COMMUNITY OF STAR FOLLOWERS. BEING A STAR FOLLOWER DOESN'T MEAN DROPPING WHAT YOU'RE DOING IN LIFE AND MOVING FAR AWAY TO PREACH THE GOSPEL AND DO MISSION WORK. EACH OF US..EACH OF US HERE...CAN BE PEOPLE OF RELENTLESS HOPE WHO NEVER GIVE UP, WHO CONTINUE TO PRAY FOR AND WORK FOR AND SACRIFICE FOR THE DAY OF THE LORD. WE CAN BE PEOPLE WHO ARE FILLED WITH JOY BECAUSE WE HAVE SEEN THE CHILD; PEOPLE WHO LOVE AND CARE FOR OUR FAMILIES, GO TO WORK AND TAKE CARE OF BUSINESS; PEOPLE WHO LIVE OUR LIVES INTENTIONALLY, DOING EVERYTHING WE CAN FAITHFULLY TO FOLLOW AND BRING HONOR TO JESUS; PEOPLE WHOSE SHINING FACES REFLECT THE STARLIGHT OF BETHLEHEM, THE LIGHT THAT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS, THE LIGHT OF JESUS CHRIST. WE HAVE SEEN THE CHILD, AND NOTHING BEYOND BETHLEHEM WILL EVER BE THE SAME. STAR OF WONDER, STAR OF NIGHT. STAR WITH ROYAL BEAUTY BRIGHT. WESTWARD LEADING, STILL PROCEEDING. GUIDE US TO THY PERFECT LIGHT.

