

***Epiphany In Worship:
Looking Upward***

Matthew 2: 1-12

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Heidi Neumark was a college student who took a year off from University to mission work in South Carolina. As is so often the case, she received way more than she was ever able to give.

Her most important gift was a life lesson learned from Miss Ellie, a descendent of plantation slaves. Ellie lived miles down a small dirt road in a one-room, wooden home.

Heidi tells the story this way:

"I never could find out Miss Ellie's precise age, but it was somewhere between 90 and 100. Maybe she didn't know herself. She still chopped her own firewood, stacked in neat little piles behind the house.

"Miss Ellie had a friend named Netta whom she'd known since they were small girls. In order to get to Netta's house, Miss Ellie had to walk for miles through fields of tall grass. This was the sweet grass that local women make famous baskets out of, but it was also home to numerous poisonous snakes: coral snakes, rattlesnakes, water moccasins, and copperheads.

"Actually, Netta's home was not that far from Miss Ellie's place, but there was a stream that cut across the fields. You had to walk quite a distance to get to the place where it narrowed enough to pass. I admired Miss Ellie, who would set off to visit her friend full of bouncy enthusiasm, with no worry for the snakes or the long miles. I also felt sorry for her. Poor Miss Ellie, I thought, old and arthritic, having to walk all that way, pushing through the thick summer heat, not to mention the snakes.

"I felt sorry—until I hit upon the perfect plan. I arranged with some men to help build a simple plank bridge across the stream near Miss Ellie's house. I scouted out the ideal place—not too wide, but too deep to cross. I bought and helped carry the planks there myself. Our bridge was built in a day. I was so excited that I could hardly wait to see Miss Ellie's reaction. I went to her house, where she wanted to sit in her rocker and tell stories, but I was too impatient with my project. I practically dragged her off with me. 'Look!' I shouted, 'a shortcut for you to visit Netta!'

"Miss Ellie's face did not register the grateful, happy look I expected. There was no smile, no jumping the sky. Instead, for a long time, she looked puzzled, then she shook her head and looked at me as though I were the one who needed pity.

'Child, I don't need a shortcut.'

"And she told about all the friends she kept up with on her way to visit Netta. A shortcut would cut her off from Mr. Jenkins, with whom she always swapped gossip; from Miss Hunter, who so looked forward to the quilt scraps she'd bring by; from the raisin wine she'd taste at one place in exchange for her biscuits; and the chance to look in on the "old folks" who were sick.

"'Child,' she said again, 'can't take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don't mix with love.'"

[Adapted from Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space* (Beacon Press, 2003), p. 16-17]

Shortcuts don't mix with love - or with worship.
Somehow the wise men from the east knew this.
There were to be no short cuts on this particular mission.
They came to Jerusalem to worship the king of the Jews.

We don't very much about these shadowy figures.

How many? Tradition says three, and by the sixth century even assigns names to them - but Matthew doesn't say any of this. He simply tells of three gifts.

Were they kings? Tradition from early on says so - but that probably is just speculative extrapolation from Isaiah 60:3 which speaks of kings coming to the rising of Israel's dawn - and here is Jesus, the dawning of the era of Salvation.

Where did in the East did they come from? Babylon, perhaps? There was a sizeable community of Jews there. History tells of magi there. Perhaps the wise men got hold of Hebrew scriptures from them.

How many, whomever and from wherever, it would have been a challenging journey. And if history gives any insight into ancient travel for upper crust folk, it would have been noisy and dirty - servants, camels. It would have involved a great deal of preparation. Today we'd think nothing of a quick 400km trip to Toronto. But then, far from it! I mean, no Timothy's or Starbucks along the way to refill their travel mugs. (How did they do it?)

No shortcuts!

They see the star - which may have been an aligning of planets, or a special miraculous heavenly phenomenon. We're not told, and it doesn't really matter. All we know is that God made some light appear, and drew the attention of the magi to that light. He didn't allow them to become distracted.

And he helped their minds connect the dots between this heavenly light/star appearance and the birth of the Saviour King in Bethlehem. How? Again, we don't know - perhaps through Jews in the area. Perhaps through so-call coincidences in reading or study. However it occurred, God made it happen.

Off they go on the big trip.

And once in Israel, there is no MTO flashing road sign indicating where the child is to be found. No

TravelOntario kiosk to get directions

- though, being men, would they have used it anyway?

Nothing quick - no shortcut.

Matthew tells us how they have to dig for information.

And how, under God's guiding hand they are brought to Jesus, where

at

long

last

they can worship!!

Which they do.

Worship -

They honour Jesus.

And they present a sacrificial gift to this great King.

Yes -

They kneel. Yes - proud men on their knees in humble posture.

And they worship.

Lavishly.

No short cuts.

You know, there's actually a prophetic picture in the gifts -

- gold symbolizing royalty;

- frankincense often used in altar sacrifices, symbolizing deity;

- and myrrh was a spice often used for burial preparations, symbolizing the coming death of Jesus.

...the royal God who will die!!

Just don't think that the magi knew any of this - they simply brought costly gifts from their treasury.

They didn't want to skimp. No shortcuts.

Only the fully best for Jesus.

They came, and they came fully prepared.

And ready for full blown worship. Nothing half way.

Which gave my wandering mind food for thought -

How prepared are we as we come to worship?

Or is worship something we do only when the whim strikes us and times seems to free up in our daily calendar?

There was a time when families would prepare for Sunday worship already on Saturday night. Offering money was placed on the kitchen counter, a little pile for each child to place in the offering plate. Shoes were lined up and polished in the porch or down in the basement. Baths were had. Special clothing laid out. In bed on time. Anticipating the gathering with God's people in worship on the Lord's Day.

Perhaps we say - ach, how formal and rigid that all was.

Maybe.

But compare it to today - where we sometimes drag ourselves out of bed at the last minute, bleary eyed after a late party, throwing on whatever clothing we have, and heading out the door to arrive at the last minute, looking forward to the end of formalities and the serving of post-service coffee, hoping for a caffeine jolt to kick start the rest of the day.

Or the worship of daily personal devotions - too many of us have no reading plan, no set time when we do it, no prayer list to guide us. And then we wonder why personal worship time so quickly fizzles out.

Or when we don't schedule and build a habit of attending corporate worship, when we just do it as and when we feel like it...

...when we do that, wondering why worship happens less and less frequently.

The magi came prepared. They were intentional about their worship.

And they came deliberately, to worship a king. They were clear about their purpose.

- It was no side trip, no haphazard "whatever" tacked onto a tourist-vacation. You know, going off to Damascus and...

"Hey, by the way, lets wander down to Jerusalem and check it out."

"Yeah, sure, whatever."

No.

None of that.

Rather, they enter Jerusalem - "Where is the king of the Jews? We have come to pay him homage."

They knew exactly why they were there. No waffling. No distractions. The reason for the trip was very clear in their mind.

Our worship - whether the corporate formal weekly worship, or daily personal devotional time...

Are we as clear?

That our worship is to come and pay homage to the King?

Not to find some meditative centre for our lives, or to relax, or to organize our thoughts.

And as we gather each week, it is not about singing the songs we like, or engaging in rituals that we find comfortable, or viewing art work we consider pleasing, or catching up with old friends and meeting new acquaintances who warm our hearts.

That's not what worship is all about.

It is to come and pay homage to the King of Creation.

To humble our lives before Him.

To offer Him our gifts.

Fellow pilgrims in faith - how was your worship in 2006?

Was it intentional; did you come prepared, ready, with your gifts?

Was it clear in your heart and mind why you came?

[pause]

"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"

The wise men came seeking Jesus.

Without even knowing fully who he was or what he was all about.

They came!

With this ironic twist -

That they were totally unaware that their question, "Where is he?" was really an echo of a much earlier question, a question first asked in a garden where another One came on a search,

intentionally,

with clear purpose.

"Where are you?" that One asked.

It was God, in the garden looking for our sin-fallen, cowering human parents, Adam and Eve.

They were hiding from Him, aware of their sin, aware that they weren't worthy, oh so well aware of how everything was all dark and wrong.

Yet God came to seek them, to call them back, to save them.

Intentionally.
With clear purpose.
"Where are you?"

Which is what led to the time of worship in Bethlehem.
It wasn't, you see, first of all about the magi finding the Son of God.
It was about Him, in the eternal scheme of things, finding them.
Did they ever get to understanding that?
Perhaps not.
And, quite frankly, it doesn't really matter.
What matters is that they responded to divine prompting.
And in their intentional, clear response the Son of God was revealed to them.
The Son of God revealed - the great Epiphany.

Friends, these wise men were among the first to worship Jesus.
We have the privilege of following in their footsteps.
Of joining with them in worshipping Jesus
Intentionally.
Clearly.

Responding to the work that God is busy doing in our lives.
See - That's why you're here.
Because God IS at work in your life.

Oh, you could point to all kinds of circumstances and say,
"That's why I'm here."
But let me tell you right now that behind the scenes God is at work in your life.
And today, early in the New Year of 2007, I'm inviting you to acknowledge that work and respond to it.

Friends -
Let's be wise.

The Bible calls to us this way in Colossians 3:
Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated
at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

The magi looked up to the heavens,
saw the star
responded intentionally
and brought the clear sacrifice of worship.
In doing that they found the Saviour.

I'm inviting you to join me this year of 2007 in lifting up our hearts. Looking up, so to speak, to heaven. Setting
our hearts on things above to where this same Jesus, before whom the wise men knelt, is now at the side of
God the Father.
Looking for our response.
Our intentional response.
Our clear response.

Will you give it?

We don't have to travel hundreds or thousands of kilometres to worship.
We can do it every day - right where we live.
We can do it each week - right here in our home town.
Right here in this church - two opportunities per week.
We can do it in our own quiet, personal spaces at home.

We don't have gold, frankincense or myrrh.
But we do have gifts of time, gifts of service, gifts of money.
We can bring those.

Contributing them with an upward glance -

 "Jesus, this is for you."

 Intentionally.

 Clearly.

It takes effort.

Like for the wise men, there is no shortcut around the effort.

But then,

 hey,

 as Ellie put it -

 "child, shortcuts don't mix with love!"

God took no shortcuts.

He made the full effort through Jesus - sending him into our broken world as Saviour. Doing it because of his deep, deep love for us.

 No shortcuts.

I'm inviting you to a year of worship response to that love

 no shortcuts

 giving our love, in worship, back to Him.