

“Aha”

Matthew 2:1-12

Whitefish UMC

January 2, 2011, Epiphany Sunday

- † Today we celebrate what the ancient church named the Feast of the Epiphany. The word "epiphany" comes from a Greek word meaning "manifestation" or "striking appearance." Before Christianity, the word was used to record occasions when Greek gods and goddesses made appearances on earth.
- † In the Eastern Church, which includes the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches, Epiphany is a general celebration of God's becoming man. It includes celebrating a whole host of things: the birth of the baby Jesus, the revelation of Jesus' divinity to the rest of the world — like to the Magi visiting from Persia — and most importantly in the East, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River.
- † Centuries after the Eastern Orthodox Church began celebrating the Epiphany, the Roman Catholic Church decided to start doing so too. But for some reason, the Western Church really latched on to this image of the Persian priests bringing gifts of frankincense, myrrh, and gold to the infant Jesus, guided from their homeland of Iran by a shining star. The Magi are mentioned only in Matthew's Gospel and he never specified how many magi there were — just that there were three gifts.
- † In 1857, the Reverend John Henry Hopkins Jr. wrote some lyrics for a seminary Christmas pageant, a song that begins: "We three kings of Orient are /

Bearing gifts we traverse afar / Field and fountain, moor and mountain /
Following yonder star."

- † Around the time that Irish writer James Joyce was defecting from the Roman Catholic Church, he was investing secular meaning into the word "epiphany." In his early 20s, he drew up little sketches, sort of like "prose poems," in which he illustrated epiphanies.
- † He explained to his brother Stanislaus that epiphanies were sort of "inadvertent revelations" and said they were "little errors and gestures — mere straws in the wind — by which people betrayed the very things they were most careful to conceal." He also wrote that the epiphany was the sudden "revelation of the whatness of a thing," the moment when "the soul of the commonest object ... seems to us radiant."
- † The church historian H. Richard Niebuhr likens an epiphany to a moment when we are reading "a difficult book, seeking to follow a complicated argument, [and] we come across a luminous sentence from which we can go forward and backward and so attain some understanding of the whole."
- † With an epiphany, there comes some moment when an important truth suddenly becomes clear, and we can look back on our past and change our thinking forward in light of it. Now the past makes sudden sense; now the future calls for a new direction. It becomes an "Aha" moment.
- † The biblical story of the Magi and their epiphany calls forth three important elements of this new way of seeing. We can learn a lot from their experience. First, the Magi looked beyond their usual way of living—they looked up toward the heavens, and they saw a star. But it wasn't so much a matter of astrology as it was about attitude. They wanted to launch out beyond themselves, to reach upward and outward, investing themselves in going places they'd never been before.

- † Have you ever thought of the things that these wise men did not know? Like Abraham, they set out on a journey, not knowing where it would take them. They didn't know how long the trip would be once they decided to follow the star. They didn't know how they would be received in a faraway foreign place. They had no idea who this new king they were to follow would be, and they didn't know when or even if they would return home. Yet they chose to make the journey.
- † And that's the second element—a journey. The Magi left home, the most familiar of places, the status quo, and ventured toward a yet unknown destination. As it is with any journey worth taking, there are rough spots and smooth parts, and you never know for sure where and when they will occur.
- † And of course an epiphany finally takes us through and comes out of some of the darkest times and events of our lives. It was true for the Magi, certainly. Their story is full of treachery and deceit on the part of Herod and his minions. But as the gospel says, as the ultimate truth of epiphany proves, the darkness cannot overcome the light that has come.
- † A friend and colleague, Dave McConnell, recommended a book to me that I have just had time to read since Christmas. Ironically, it is called City of Tranquil Light, by Bo Caldwell. I have inflicted it on my book club, and now I am doing so to you. The writer bases the book on the lives of her missionary grandparents, Mennonites who journeyed to the Middle Kingdom of China in 1906.
- † Will and Katherine meet on the sea voyage to China and wed a couple of years later. The book describes their lives together, looking back sixty years. When they leave their homes for China, they are fearful, unformed, but determined. They arrive in China as aliens in a strange land among even more strange

people, but as time passes, they learn that the people have as much to teach them about healing and grace as they have to offer.

- † Could they have learned these lessons without their willingness to risk, their journey, their struggles and dark experiences? Their stories involve a series of epiphanies, poignant and beautiful. One of my favorite passages involves a time when Katherine welcomes a group of women to her clinic. They come not for healing, but to learn her story. The Chinese women ask her why she left her home to come to China, and what her life was like.
- † Katherine says: “I stared at all of them, trying to think of what to tell them. Help me, I thought. Then I said, ‘I first thought of coming here after my mother died...I loved my mother deeply, and I felt lost after her death. I felt as if I had wandered far from home and did not know how to return.’”
- † She then describes how with her mother gone, it was her job to start the kitchen fire each morning, and she sat near the fire and read her mother’s Bible. She tells the women: “it’s a book of stories about God. I usually read what we call the Psalms, which are poems about God. The poet speaks often of his pain, and this comforted me. But he also speaks of love for his God, and this gave me heart.”
- † Katherine goes on to tell about a morning almost a year after her mother’s death when she read a story in Luke’s Gospel that she had read many times before. “My eyes fell upon a story I knew well, in which this man Jesus, whom we believe to be God’s Son, showed His followers that He loved them in a surprising way: He washed their feet.”
- † This conversation between the visiting Chinese women and Katherine is even more notable because on a previous visit the women asked Katherine if they could see her (to them) very large feet. Their feet, of course, are tiny in comparison, because they have been broken bound since childhood.

- † Katherine notices the women’s surprise. “Yes, He washed their feet. They did this because He loved them and because he wanted to show them that serving others is honorable, and what God wants us to do—what we are created to do.”
- † She describes how on that morning, Jesus was suddenly very real, as if He were in the room with her, washing her feet as she watched. “I was so overcome that I fell to my knees. I was certain that God wanted me to serve Him, and I wanted to do that more than anything in the world. I said yes.” “I stopped. I was surprised I had said so much and was embarrassed. I looked at Feng Chen Mei (the leader of the women), waiting for her to respond.”
- † “Kung Mei Li,” she said finally, “we are most grateful that your Jesus God has washed your feet and brought you to us.” “I started to correct her, thinking I had misspoken. ‘Oh no, He didn’t really’—but I stopped. Truth seemed to trump fact: perhaps He was speaking through me in spite of me. ‘Thank you,’ I said, ‘As am I.’”
- † After this conversation, Katherine tells of how, as the women leave, she sees the ugly City of Tranquil Light with a new vision. “As I looked down the street—our street—I felt a sudden wave of affection pass through me and I thought, I love it here. The realization brought me up short; I found myself in awe of the sudden loveliness of the very city I so disliked only a few months ago.”
- † An epiphany—one of many for this couple in a strange land over many years. But they don’t just happen in books to missionary families.
- † When were times that you were seeking to see God at work in a new light in your life? Was it only in times of need or suffering? Was it part of an intellectual search, or did it come from a deep personal hunger for meaning? Or was it intentional at all?

- † Did it happen in the quiet of Christmas Eve, as the candles were raised during Silent Night? Or did it come in a moment of forgiveness given unexpectedly or received gracefully? Did it happen by surprise with someone you had previously found annoying? Or are you still waiting?
- † My Epiphany prayer for you, for me, for our world, is expressed in these beautiful words of the 20th century mystic, Thomas Merton: *"I have the immense joy of being a member of a race in which God became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are....There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed."*
- † Arise, shine, for your light has come. And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Amen.

Sources:

Garrison Keillor, "The Writer's Almanac—Feast of the Epiphany"

Bo Caldwell, [City of Tranquil Light](#), 2010.

Kate Huey, "weekly seeds," <http://www.ucc.org>

H. Richard Niebuhr, cited in [Feasting on the Word](#), 2010.