

Sermon Manuscript – January 8, 2017 @ Our Saviour – Croton-on-Hudson

It's hard to believe that I've been with you know for nearly four months and yet I feel as if I've just begun here, and we've barely gotten a chance to know each other. One of the things you might not know about me is that I can be a little impish at times – you know, sort of a player of practical jokes, a tease, someone who likes a bit of fun when things get a little too serious. A particular favorite pastime of mine, which some may find annoying, is that I have a penchant for doing some rather silly things when someone, usually a member of my own family, is trying to set up a photograph. While the one taking the photo is trying to create that famous Kodak moment, I often find myself intending to make that memory just a little bit more special. It might be a silly smirk to show a little playfulness while others are busy pasting their smiles on for the flash. I'm known to even do some creative things with my fingers behind someone's head to give them the appearance of having animal qualities. But my favorite prank might just be jumping into a photo shot at the last minute, when I'm not even supposed to be taking part. And in today's world of social media, where everyone, everywhere carries a camera in their pocket, this impish activity even has a name. It's called the photo-bomb!

Not all photo-bombs however, are the result of devilish pranksters like myself. In fact, the most humorous of photo-bombs are usually quite serendipitous. If the sanctuary were equipped with an audio-visual system, I might regale you with a brief slide show of these hilarious moments in time, but perhaps you can picture these Polaroids in your mind as I describe them. A young couple just married at a destination wedding lines up a perfect shot on a bridge overlooking the city. Just as the photographer is ready to capture this memory for all time, a dog enters the frame, and does what dogs often do when they are let out and squat down in the road. Or there's the family vacation photo taken on the beach during a beautiful sunset. The shot is just breathtaking with the sun in the background half submerged below the

sea, when an unusually large gentleman wearing much less covering than he should, appears out of nowhere to accent the natural beauty of landscape. And there's always that most risky of photo ops, as a tourist in the big city, where you stop to capture a moment at a famous landmark, only to find that in your shot has walked the uninvited guest who is picking his nose, or just realized far too late that you are in the middle of snapping your memory. Indeed, the most memorable, and most amusing (or frustrating, depending on your perspective) of photo-bombs happens when someone enters a scene when they are not expected to be there.

In some ways, I feel this way about the visit of the Magi, which we commemorate today, observing the Feast of the Epiphany. Here, we've just celebrated Christmas, and the pure splendor of a newborn baby, who is the promised Emmanuel – the God who dwells with us – a story of how God loves the poor, the outcast, the ordinary, and does the extraordinary through all the adversity that ordinary people face in their lives. We rejoiced with the lowly shepherds who were the first outside Jesus' own family to witness God breaking into the world. And we sang Christmas carols together, remembering the wonder of the world changed forever that first Christmas night. One might even refer to Christmas as God's ultimate photo-bomb, putting Jesus, Mary and Joseph in a place where no one would expect God to enter the world. And like Mary and the shepherds, we watched and treasured the precious moment of Christmas.

One of the hallmarks of a good photo-bomb, is that the unexpected figure takes over the shot and becomes the center of attention in the photograph. Well, I don't think there is much of a question as to who the center of the photo would be if cameras had been invented at the time of Jesus birth. The center of that transformational moment then, as well as now, is always the figure of Jesus Christ, the God who came to earth to live a human life. But today, some new faces enter the picture that don't seem to fit the story, and our attention is drawn to them, sometimes to the point of overwhelming the true center of our devotion. We are

introduced to some strange visitors from another land that break into the story, seemingly from out of nowhere, and presenting Jesus and Mary with gifts, lavish gifts that tell us something about who Jesus is and what his birth is meant to reveal as an epiphany to the world.

In fact, the word epiphany itself can be loosely translated as a kind of photo-bomb. An epiphany is a revealing, an illuminating exposure of something new, or previously hidden. Literally, from the Greek, epiphany means to show above, to make something stand out that you might not have noticed before. During this season of epiphany, each week will mark some way in which Jesus stood out while living out his calling as Emmanuel, Messiah, Teacher and Lord. We need to remember that even today when we recall the visit of the Magi, it is Jesus' epiphany that we celebrate and recognize, even though our wise friends from the East make an attention-grabbing entrance.

Still, to understand the significance of the Magi's visit, as it relates to the revealing of Jesus Christ to the world, we need to understand something about them, and why they might have slipped into the story. In all likelihood, the Magi were a group of priests from the land of Persia, perhaps as much as 1,000 miles from greater Jerusalem where our story takes place. If they were indeed from Persia, they would likely have practiced the religion known as Zoroastrianism, which elevated star-divination, or astrology to a science. While Zoroastrians did not believe in the practice of sorcery, they were given the name Magi, which is the root of our word "magic". As astrological experts, these priests would have seen something in the star patterns and discerned that God was preparing to do something new and special in the world; something so revolutionary that this group of learned religious men would travel for weeks to the West to see God's epiphany in the face of a child.

Whatever was happening in the sky those nights which Matthew refers to as a star, guides the Magi all the way to Jerusalem, to the palace of Herod. It's a little confusing as to

why they needed Herod's assistance, since we know from the story that it was the star, and not Herod who led them to Jesus. As VIPs from a foreign country, perhaps it was customary to announce your business to the person in charge of a city you had just entered, and that is why the Magi chose an audience with Herod. Whatever the reason, the contrast between Herod's view of events, and that of the Magi is a mini-epiphany within the larger story. While the visitors from the East have endured a long and perilous journey to worship the new King, the puppet King Herod finds this news threatening and summons royal advisers to confirm the possible whereabouts of the baby by examining the prophecies about the coming Messiah. They advise Herod that the expected birthplace of this anointed leader of the Jews was Bethlehem, a small suburb of the great center of Jewish life, a couple hours walk from Herod's palace. Herod provides this information to the Magi who he sends out as scouts with a request to report back the exact location of Jesus, feigning to have the same interest as they in paying honor to God's Messiah. In a foreshadowing of the events of Jesus' life and its legacy to the world, the Magi are the first outsiders, strangers, migrants who come to worship Jesus, while the powerful leaders of Jesus' own religion see him as a threat, something that will upset the status quo of which they benefit and have become quite fond.

The Magi in the story are unnamed and unnumbered. We can only determine that there were more than one on this journey. Even though the tradition in the church has held that three Magi were present, and that the church even knew their names, Matthew's omission of these facts tell us that we shouldn't see the Magi as photo-bombers at all, but see in their anonymity a reason to focus elsewhere in the story, back to the central figure of worship, back to the baby God, Jesus. They are not famous by their own self-righteousness. They are made famous because they enter the story of Jesus.

After their long arduous journey, the Magi finally arrive at their destination and their first act is not to identify themselves, not to claim for themselves any special attention because of their labor, not even to show the gifts they brought with them. Upon meeting Jesus, the first act of the Magi is worship, of paying homage to God, of setting their own needs aside to focus on a once-in-a-lifetime encounter with the living God. Only after kneeling before Christ, do the Magi then offer signs of gratitude; gifts are at the same time lavish, unusual and revealing.

Three gifts are named in the story, which is probably where the tradition of three Magi came to be, though the story does not mention such a relationship. The first gift mentioned is gold. No so unusual a gift perhaps, though I don't think anyone has left a box of gold under my Christmas Tree in past years. We certainly understand that gold is a valuable metal and that such a gift would have been seen as quite generous, even in those times. More importantly, the gift of gold symbolizes the recognition that Jesus is a king among kings, the one to whom the entire world will be drawn as the leader of God's in-breaking new kingdom. The worshipful and generous acts of the Magi, suggest similar responses are appropriate for God's people today, that we use our gifts to draw others to the miracle of God's love.

The second gift the Magi offer to Jesus is a bit more puzzling to understand its value – frankincense. Like many naturally occurring resins, frankincense is thought to have medicinal healing qualities, but it's primary purpose was to be burned as part of temple ritual to symbolize the presence of God in the midst of the people's worship. The presentation of frankincense by the Magi was an acknowledgement that they were in the presence of the divine, and also signified Jesus' role as a high priest, or priest among priests, foreshadowing sacrifices that would have to be made for the sins of the people.

The most unusual of the three gifts was myrrh, another kind of resin that was used for embalming dead bodies. It was a rare material, reserved normally for the burial of kings and

priests. It certainly would be an odd gift to present at a baby shower, but its presence in the story reflects the expectation that Jesus would ultimately be sacrificed himself in order for God's work to prevail in the world.

Finally, after all the gifts are presented, the visit with Mary and Jesus seems quite short, and the Magi leave to return to their homeland. I'm sure they talked about returning to Herod to share news of their visit, but something in their earlier meeting with him gave the Magi the feeling that Herod had less-than-pure motives for wanting to know about Jesus. They returned home without seeing Herod again, and after having been in the real presence of the one true God, no longer had need of a star to guide them on their journey. Just as wise people still do today, they now followed the brightest and best star, the light of Jesus. I think the third verse of the hymn we are about to sing summarizes the meaning of the Magi's visit for us in a rich and poetic way: Hymnwriter Reginald Heber writes of the gifts God values most:

Vainly we offer each ample oblation
Vainly, with gifts would his favor secure
Richer by far is the heart's adoration
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor. AMEN!