

Hindsight and Foresight – Seeing Clearer©

Matthew 2:1-12

January 1, 2017

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As we gather here on this New Year's Day, it is a time for looking back and looking ahead as well. In the past year we have experienced joy and fun; good things have come to us and at the same time we have had pain and great loss as we grieve over those who have gone on to be with God.

We give thanks for the faith we have that our loved ones are in that final glorious home, yet we grieve that here in our every day lives, we have to feel the emptiness and hurt that missing them causes.

We also just look back at our lives and the decisions we made – some we may feel very good about. We can feel certain that the choices we made were the best ones, the right ones for the situation.

We look back with hindsight that can give us a sense of seeing that we might have done something else, something better. We might come to the present with regret sometimes, when we see a little clearer the choice we made.

But really, even when we understand that there could have been a better decision, and even with some regrets we might have, the important thing is to learn from those choices, right? If we don't learn from our mistakes then that's when we will be forever struggling.

And then, on New Year's Day we are perpetually making new resolutions. Promises to ourselves that we are going to "clean up our act." No more, will we make those bad decisions. In fact, it's going to be the best, healthiest, "get our act together" kind of year ever.

We start out the new year with such high hopes of doing better this year. Of wiping the slate clean and starting anew. It's going to be the best year EVER!

Of course, by the time we come back here to remember Jesus' baptism – which is next Sunday – we may have broken most of those resolutions. It's just who we are.

Today, we also are celebrating Epiphany. The actual day of Epiphany on the church calendar is January 6th but I decided that we would celebrate it today on New Year's Day because I think the two go together fairly well.

But it is on Epiphany when we read about and celebrate the wise men's visit to the baby Jesus.

Epiphany means *manifestation*, which means, according to the online Merriam Webster dictionary: *a* : the act, process, or an instance of manifesting; or something that manifests or is manifest; ...

And manifest means something is readily perceived by the senses and especially by the sense of sight; easily understood or recognized by the mind.

But, why is this story so important for us to hear? What is it that is manifested anyway?

We've been here before and we've heard this story so many times we might be able to tell it without reading it, right?

The wise men – these men who study the stars, who are called magi, who are probably wealthy, maybe royals – Gentiles! – come to Jerusalem searching for the newborn king of Israel.

Who can tell me how many wise men (or kings) there were? What does Matthew say?

Actually, Matthew doesn't say. He just says some wise men come from the East, following the star. They go to King Herod and ask where this king is because they saw his star at its rising and they have come to pay him homage (honor, respect).

I have to admit (in fact, I've told you this before) that I sometimes go into silly mode and call these wise men, wise guys. I can't help but think of the Three Stooges where the one says to the other, "Ah! Wise guy, huh?" And then he slaps him, or something really mean.

But it seems to me that the wise men really weren't all that wise. In hindsight – looking back – they probably wished they hadn't gone so quickly to King Herod. They were loose lipped in telling Herod all about Jesus, too. I'll bet, once they were instructed by the angel to go back home a different way, they were regretting their decision to rush into Jerusalem, don't you?

But of course, I'm being a little overly silly. Because these men – these gentiles from the east – were very serious about worshipping this newborn King.

Of course, we know by now what Herod does. He asks the Chief Priests and the Scribes where this child would be. Herod was a wise guy too. He knew they could help. And they quoted the prophet, Micah, that said this King would be born in Bethlehem.

Herod was a wise guy, for sure. He cunningly told the travelers from the east where they could find Jesus and asked them to come back so he too could pay his respects.

We know that story by now, don't we? We know the wise men were warned by an angel and went home a different way. We know that Herod was so angry he ordered the murder of children, trying to get rid of the threat of another king.

The whole story of Jesus' birth and life kind of reminds us of the story of Moses. Did you ever think of that? Moses birth was unusual – born of a Hebrew woman at a time

when Pharaoh wanted Hebrew babies killed – worried that the Hebrew people would multiply and rise up and over-take the Egyptians.

Moses was protected by his mother by putting him in a woven basket in the water, where Pharaoh's daughter found him and took him home and raised him as her son.

Jesus, too, was born at a dangerous time – a time when the Romans occupied Israel, when Herod was king and was quick to act with violence towards anyone who came up against him.

Jesus – born in a stable – or a cave where animals were kept – whose parents had to flee with him to protect him.

Moses – who became God's instrument for saving God's people – the Israelites who later became known as the Jews.

Jesus – whose very name means "One who saves."

But here is one reason this story in the 2nd chapter of Matthew is so significant for us today. The Israelites (the Jews) repeat their story over and over, telling of God's mighty power to save them. They teach it to their children. They celebrate it every year at Passover. They do everything they can to never forget their story of salvation.

But, we weren't there when God sent the plagues to Egypt so Pharaoh would let the people go. We weren't there that night of Passover when Moses led the people out of Egypt. And we were not there as the Red Sea divided for the Israelites to pass through safely to the other side, away from angry soldiers. We were not there. We are not Jews. That is not our personal story.

THIS is our story! This is the good news that while Jesus, the Son of God, came as a human – a Jewish human – and while God worked through him and his Jewish disciples – this story of Jesus – is for us ALL. Not just the Jews but for the Gentiles, which includes all of us!

The wise men found the Christ child and they perceived who He was and they knelt down and worshipped him and offered him their best gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh.

The light of God shone in the star and even as Isaiah prophesied in the passage that we said in our Call to Worship – "Arise, shine! For your light has come."

Our light has come. The Light of the world. The Light that shines in the darkness that nothing can overcome. The Light that makes known the grace and love of Immanuel – God with us.

An epiphany (with a small e) is when something becomes suddenly clear. We sometimes say, “the light came on.” You’ve seen those cartoon drawings of a person who gets a good idea, and above their heads a light bulb is shining.

But our Epiphany (with a capitol E) means that we’ve seen the Divine Light – we’ve recognized him. We know this is God incarnate – God in Christ. This is the Messiah that the world was promised.

Our Epiphany is that he did not just come for the people who had long been called God’s chosen. He has chosen us all! (Even us Presbyterians who have been called “The Frozen Chosen” sometimes.) We are all of us the reason Christ came to earth.

He came to bring salvation to all people. He came to forgive sins, to pour grace upon grace upon us. He came, including us in baptism in his name and at the table – our Passover – where we tell Jesus’ story – our story – of Jesus saving us from sin and death.

This is more than just an event that happened for us long ago. This is an Epiphany that keeps happening. People all over the world continue to have this Epiphany of seeing in a new way – of realizing who Christ is; of understanding finally that this faith is for them too.

This Light of the World is a Light for all the nations. But it is our story to tell. We are the people whom others didn’t think would fit into the story of the Jewish Messiah – the King of the Jews. Yet we have been included.

As we come now, with hindsight, looking back at our year in the past we bring it all together with this great promise that comes with the incarnation – the Epiphany of the Lord – the manifestation of God in Christ that we see more clearly through Scripture – we can look into the future – into the coming year new year with hope, love, peace and joy.

We can pretty much be sure that in this coming year there will be moments of great joy and promise; times of much success and pleasure.

But just as every year comes and goes, we can probably count on having some heartache and pain, some disappointments and struggles and failures too.

Thing is, because we are the people of the light, we are the gentiles whom the 3 kings represent, we can look back with hindsight and know that there is grace for our mistakes. But we can look ahead in foresight, knowing that we will do our best, with God’s help and whatever comes, Emmanuel – God with us – is always there.

We – the people of the light – see more clearly because of his birth, his coming, his life, his death and resurrection.