Homily for Second Sunday of Christmas

January 3, 2021

S. Stephen’s, Providence

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy 10th Day of Christmas,

and to all of you viewing this, sincere wishes for a happy New Year.

On this Second Sunday after Christmas,

we find ourselves anticipating somewhat the Feast of the Epiphany,

which will fall on Wednesday later this week.

We’ve heard this morning

the familiar account of the three Wise Men –

their encounter with Herod,

and their arrival at the house of Jesus,

bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The danger with these parts of the Gospel which we know so well,

and see acted out in Christmas pageants,

is that we sometimes risk missing some serious questions posed to us

by this story.

On the surface, the visit and arrival of the Wise Men serve to show

that this Jesus who has been born the Messiah

is going to do more than just redeem his native Israel.

His kingship and dominion are to extend to the Gentiles and all nations,

and will fulfill the prophetic words of Isaiah:

“Nations shall stream to thy light,

and kings to the brightness of thy dawning.”

However, for me, the wise men also serve on a deeper level

to represent all of us, and the life of seeking faith –

essentially the Christian life.

Here are men, and probably some women too, though they’re not mentioned,

who have felt God stir up in them something so profound,

that they’re willing to disrupt their lives in search of it.

They were willing to leave their homelands,

and set out on a journey which did not have a set length,

for they could not be certain of where it would end.

All they had was a light to guide them,

and hope and faith in the God who called them.

They were men who were in search of something – of someone –

who would change their world.

And so today I ask you to consider, as we ponder the journey of the Wise Men,

what is it you are seeking?

You, who are seekers and fellow travelers on this journey of faith

which is the Christian life:

who or what are you looking for?

Who have you expected to find?

And maybe more importantly,

if you feel that you have at some point found it,

was it what you expected?

Our entire lives are a seeking after God.

As the psalmist sings, (Ps. 27)

5 One thing have I asked of the LORD; one thing I seek; \*

 that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life;

11 [O Lord,] You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." \*

 Your face, LORD, will I seek.

For one day in thy courts is better than a thousand in my own room. (Ps. 84)

As I consider the question I’ve put before us this morning,

“What is it that you are looking for?”

I’m aware that that carries a certain poignancy and weight this year.

For many of us,

the life of seeking after God is manifested in coming into the church building:

we seek after God alongside other seekers,

in a place where we feel like we can come closer to touching God,

and experiencing the divine.

Right now, we may just be seeking an end to this pandemic,

and a return to normalcy.

But for now,

I ask you from this pulpit, imagining you at home on your sofas,

or perhaps even in bed, for all I know,

what it is you are hoping to find as you seek after God.

Are you looking for riches and wealth?

Are you looking for peace of mind, and happiness of spirit?

Are you looking for a source of joy and gladness?

Are you looking for a way to make sense of all the pain and brokenness

of the world?

Are you looking for a way to cope with sadness and loss in your own life?

Are you looking for strength? or for hope? or simply for quiet?

For a light that will illumine your heart and mind,

and shine the light of God into every corner and facet of your being?

If I were able to ask each of you, “what are you looking for?”

you would all probably give me as many different answers as there are of you.

The truth is that in different seasons of life

we come to God seeking different things,

in part because we need certain things at particular times of life

that we don’t need as much of in other seasons of life.

The spiritual needs of a young mother

are different than the spiritual needs of an elderly woman –

and the prayers of someone coping with the death of a loved one,

will be very different from the prayers of someone

who has received good news regarding a medical diagnosis.

And yet,

at the center – at the very core of all our needs,

all our wants, our desires, our longings, as varied as they may be,

is Jesus.

From him comes all our hope, our strength, and our comfort:

from him we find solace, healing, and peace,

wisdom, love, and light.

Whatever we are seeking, and whatever we are in need of,

we will find it in him.

Since the Wise Men were not Jews,

we may well wonder what exactly it was

that stirred them to seek out the King of the Jews:

what was it in their own lives that was missing,

and compelled them to embark on their journey?

What was it they hoped to find, or what was it they had been promised?

We’ll never know for certain.

But we do know that when they arrived,

and beheld this child,

they fell down upon their knees and worshiped him.

After all their searching and seeking,

they had finally arrived at the object of their desire and longing,

and instinctively, with every fiber of their being,

they knew that as they saw the face of this child,

they were somehow looking into the very face of God.

What could any of us do in that moment but fall down on our knees?

Even if we had gifts of frankincense, gold, or myrrh to offer,

they would be meaningless.

What does the Creator of the worlds need with gold?

All we can offer is our selves – our hearts and souls.

As a favorite Epiphany hymn goes,

“Vainly we offer each ample oblation,
vainly with gifts would his favour secure:
richer by far is the heart's adoration,
dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.”

And in that beloved Christmas hymn,

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

In closing,

I would suggest that there are two other truths to be gleaned

from the visit of the Magi or Wise Men this morning:

The first is that we cannot help but be changed by encounter.

Our encounters with all sorts of people and places change us in all sorts of ways.

We know that.

But an encounter with the Living God – the God we encounter in our hearts,

or in the Eucharist,

or in the beauty of the natural created order –

an encounter with that God cannot help but leave us profoundly changed.

We are told the Wise Men returned to their own country

by a different road than the one they had arrived on.

They couldn’t go back the same way, yes because of Herod,

but I don’t think they could have gone back by the same road anyway

because nothing was the same!

Everything was different!

We too cannot go back down the same familiar paths

once we have experienced the Love of God so intimately and powerfully.

And it is this moment of encounter that leads to the second great truth

we can take away from the story of the Wise Men this morning:

which is that in finding we are found.

Whenever we have that moment where we find God,

we also somehow find ourselves – our truest selves.

And in that moment, we see that in all our seeking and searching,

it was not we who found God, but God who found us.

And he found us long, long before we even knew to search him out.

As St. John writes, “We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

Jesus tells us in St. John’s Gospel,

“You did not choose me, but I chose you.” (John 15:16)

Why? Why me? you may wonder.

What have I done to deserve this wondrous grace and amazing love?

In truth, you have done nothing – and that is the extravagance of this gift,

so freely bestowed, and which we have been celebrating

in these twelve days of Christmas.

And so may we echo St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians,

as we praise God, saying,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing… [and chosen] us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Thanks be to God for this immeasurable gift, and the riches of his grace.

My friends, if you’re still seeking, still searching,

I promise you will find him – because he has already found you,

long, long ago.

Seek, and you will find.

Find, and be found.

Amen.