

Feast of the Epiphany January 10, 2010 Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Since those legendary foreigners from the East are our spiritual guides today, it seems fitting to talk about matters of interfaith and interspirituality. We've noted before that the magi were probably Zoroastrians. But, while much has been made of the gifts that they brought for the Christ child, we don't usually think about the gift that they brought of themselves, particularly their religion. I suppose for Christians who are just beginning to rediscover our roots in Judaism, it's not surprising that we've not paid much attention to this other belief system that enters into Matthew's Christmas story.

Even when I started getting into interfaith study, I knew very little about Zoroastrianism; I assumed it was one of those strange religions from ancient times that had died out long ago. While it has declined in number and influence, it hasn't died out. And, perhaps more relevant to us, there is speculation that it actually contributed to the beliefs of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: concepts such as monotheism, one god but with an evil adversary, heaven and hell, the coming of a virgin-born savior, and an end-time purge of the world followed by resurrection of the dead.

Zoroastrianism itself inherited ideas from other religions; many traits of Zoroastrianism can be traced way back to the culture and beliefs of India. While not everyone agrees on either the facts of all this or on the impact of these influences, it would seem that in the Epiphany story we have an opportunity to explore what happens when different religions meet one another.

We didn't used to this. It was dangerous to cross over into another religious system, and we certainly would never admit to any kind of cross-fertilization. Although there have been visionaries. Right here in San Francisco, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, was founded in 1944 as the nation's first interracial and interfaith congregation. Their vision statement proclaims the "profound conviction that meaningful and creative experiences between peoples can be more compelling than all the ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies, and prejudices that divide them."

The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, co-founder of the congregation, as well as educator, author, and civil rights leader, embodied this spirit, which really is the spirit of Epiphany. Especially at Epiphany, in the radiant brilliance of the guiding star, we can see the world differently. Everything has the potential of becoming an experience of the Divine. Every encounter can be an epiphany, every word a revelation, every challenge an opportunity to follow God's vision. Epiphany is the season of mysticism.

Now, mysticism is a word we throw around a lot. But what is it? What does it mean? According to Brother Wayne Teasdale, who wrote *The Mystic Heart*, mysticism is "the direct, immediate experience of Ultimate Reality." In other words, mysticism emphasizes experience, insight, or intuition over doctrine. This has been extremely controversial, especially within Lutheranism, with our emphasis on *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone). However, the important work done by Bengt Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics*, has gone a long way in helping us reclaim this aspect of our heritage. Hoffman documents the influence of especially the German mystics on Luther. And while you probably wouldn't call Martin Luther a mystic, we don't have to continue the dualistic, either/or choice between revelation through the word and revelation through experience.

So how does one "get mystical"? Mysticism usually centers on a practice that nurtures one's experience or awareness of the Divine. And different religions have developed practices that are intended to do just that: breathing practices, prayer, meditation, contemplation, chanting, dancing, singing. It's been one of the great gifts of the interfaith movement that we've had opportunities to learn some of these practices from other traditions – and also to reclaim some of the practices of our own.

These days we often hear about people being "spiritual but not religious" and behind that is the assumption that mystical experiences can't take place within organized religion. I don't buy that; I understand where it's coming from, but I don't think it's necessarily true. For instance, can we not say that our sacrament of Holy Communion is, in fact, a mystical practice?

We enter into a time and space that is different from any other, in which we “commune” with the Divine through common elements of bread and wine and grape juice that become the body and blood of Christ. How does this happen? There are lots of doctrines to explain it, but it is in fact a direct experience of the Divine.

We also talk about the Communion of Saints; listen to these words from the old hymn, *The Church's One Foundation*:

*Yet she on earth hath union
With God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won.*

So this mystical stuff is not really all that unfamiliar to us. And - it gives us a doorway into how we think about religions other than our own. Which brings us to Interspirituality.

In case you haven't heard, we're having a conference next month called *InterSpiritual Wisdom: Sharing the Mystic Heart*. And you may be unclear on what it's all about, what interspirituality means, and why you should be interested in it. Good questions, and I refer you to those who were at the adult Second Sunday School class this afternoon; they can explain it all to you. And also refer you to *The Mystic Heart*, in which Brother Wayne Teasdale defines “interspirituality as the sharing of ultimate experiences across traditions and claims that it is the religion of the third millennium.”

Expanding on his definition, he says that interspirituality is:

- A deep, evolving experience of community between and among the religions through their individual members
- growing receptivity to the inner treasures of the world's religions
- spiritual interdependence, as well as ecological

He says that “. . . mystical spirituality is the origin of all the world's religions . . .” and “ interspirituality is the foundation that can prepare the way for a planet-wide enlightened culture, and a continuing community among the religions that is substantial, vital, and creative.”

He also addresses some concerns and criticism: “Interspirituality is not about eliminating the world's rich diversity of religious expression. It is not about rejecting these traditions' individuality for a homogenous super-spirituality. It is not an attempt to create a new form of spiritual culture. Rather, it is an attempt to make available to everyone all the forms the spiritual journey assumes. Interspirituality as a world-changing force is made possible by the openness of people who have a viable spiritual life, coupled with their determination, capacity, and commitment to the inner search across traditions.”

When I read those words, I think of the Magi – Zoroastrians, rooted in their tradition, with no intention or desire, or it appears in Matthew, no need to convert to another religion – who crossed boundaries of geography, ethnicity, class, economics, and religion to follow their star.

And I think of Huston Smith, who studied and lived so extensively among the world's religions, when asked how he could still be a member of the Methodist church, said: “Christianity is the string on which I hang my beads.” I consider him to be one of the magi who has followed a star and now shines a light onto us as we make our way on this Epiphany adventure too.

This is the season of divine manifestation, of holy illumination, of mystical wonders. In speaking of this luminous mysticism, Howard Thurman proclaimed, "This light is the very ground of all being, the ground of creativity. Every created thing has within it the signature of the Creator – His imprint, His stamp. You may think of the light in every person as the seal of the Creator. There is no one devoid of that light. Every person is born

with it. We do not deserve any credit for having it. In truth, we cannot get rid of it. It is an inherent part of our nature."

In Ephesians, Paul, sounding like a mystic himself, declares that "the wisdom of God in all its variety" has been given to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Divine revelation is not limited to one ethnic, racial, age, gender, or religious group.

We will continue to follow the star, as a congregation – seeing illumination and guidance as we seek to respond to the needs of the world. It is obvious that “the times they are a'changing” in the church of the 21st century. But like magi, we can marvel at the unexpected possibilities before us. And perhaps we will find new beads to hang on our Christian string, all the while holding fast to the grace and truth revealed to us at Christmas, and proclaiming to the world: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you!”

Amen!