

“Where Is He?”

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he...?” (Matthew 2:1-2).*

In today’s Gospel reading from Matthew we hear the story of the Wise Men who “saw the star” and came to worship the one who was born “King of the Jews.” The account of the Wise Men has become a hallmark of our Christmas celebration and today, as we observe the beginning of the Epiphany season, these Gentile visitors to the Christ Child are very important because they unveil the fact that Jesus came to bring life *to the world*. Today, you and I stand together as direct beneficiaries of this truth that Paul calls “the mystery of Christ” – the revelation that God has come not just to save the Jewish nation but the entire world from sin and death. The word Epiphany literally means “appearance” and our celebration of this season is based on the good news that in the appearance of Jesus, salvation has come to all who receive Him by faith regardless of nation or tribe or language or race.

That is the essence of Epiphany...but before we move past this great story I want you to consider the question asked by the Wise Men. You see, after a journey that would have taken them months to complete and consumed both their energy and their wealth, the Wise Men show up in Jerusalem with one simple question: “Where is He?” Whether or not they were astronomers, they had acted on the belief that through the stars God had spoken to them. Some commentators contend that the Wise Men had drawn inspiration from an ancient prophecy in the book of Numbers where Balaam announced that, “A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17). It’s impossible to prove this from the text and yet from our Gospel reading it’s clear that the Child whom they had traveled so far to see was much more than just an earthly king.

Matthew tells us that they had come to worship. Not merely to pay their respects or deliver some kind of diplomatic greeting to a new ruler; these Wise Men from the east recognized that this child who had “been born King of Jews” was somehow divine! And the only question they had upon arriving in Jerusalem was, “*Where is He?*” Now, we know the rest of the story, how Herod tried to manipulate the Wise Men and ultimately kill the Christ Child. And we can recite the list of gifts; the gold, frankincense and myrrh with which they honored Jesus and there’s meaning in all of it...but today I want you to focus solely on their initial question because if we’re honest about it, this is a question we still struggle with today.

“Where is He?” Most Christians are not comfortable asking this question out loud. After all, aren’t believers supposed to know that God is present in their lives and trust that He has a plan for the future? The Christian faith is certainly marked by these assurances and Christ is clear in His Word that He will be with us always and that “in all things” He will work for the good of those who love Him...but that’s often not what we feel and it’s not always what we believe.

The truth is that all of us have experienced suffering in this life and all of us have been touched by tragedy and, even in the struggles of daily living, we have all cried out in desperation or at least silently wondered, “*Where is He?* Where is God now? If God is in control then why is this bad thing happening to me?” An unexpected illness, the death of someone you love, the loss of a relationship or the lie of someone you trusted; the causes vary from one person to the next but it doesn’t take much before we begin to ask the question of the Wise Men: “*Where is He?*” We expect that God will always be there to deliver, protect, and defend us from the least to the greatest of our trials...and when we experience what we think is silence from God we can begin to question or even deny our faith.

But God is not silent! And God is not absent! And the message of Epiphany reminds us of the appearance of the true God shining into a world of darkness...and the first place we see this light is in the person of Jesus. In Jesus, God acted in space and time. In Jesus, God took on our flesh and He appeared in our world. This is exactly what John announces in the introduction to His Gospel when he writes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 14).

Whether you believe it or not, the Bible clearly teaches that God appeared in the person of his Son. In fact, when Philip asked Jesus to “show (him) the Father,” Jesus answered, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:8-9). “*Where is He?*” God is present with us in the historical, flesh and blood person of Jesus. Mary held God. The Shepherds saw God. The Wise Men worshipped God. And in the life and ministry and death of Jesus, God was with us!

Yet, even for those who believe in the historical reality of Jesus Christ the question still echoes: “*Where is He?*” The problem for many believers is that even though we may know of God’s presence in His Son, our guilt and shame and fear and failings still leave us feeling disconnected and lost and we still search for some tangible means through which we can feel his presence and power. And God knows this! He knows that we are weak. He knows that we need a clear and constant connection to Christ and that is exactly what He has given us in His Word. The pages of Scripture drip with promises from God that He works through His Word. Listen to just a few of them:

- Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (5:24).
- “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (8:31).
- “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (14:23).
- “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (15:7).
- And Jesus said, “if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death” (8:51).

“*Where is He?*” He is in His Word. He is active in His Word. He is living in His Word. And through God’s Word, He is working His saving purpose. And He has promised the very same things to us in His Sacraments. Through Baptism, God binds Himself to us and promises that He will never leave us nor forsake us, and that the sin that separates us is removed and that we are one with Him and receive all the blessings of His presence. And God continues His presence in our lives through the miracle of the Lord’s Supper. In this incredible, tangible gift, Jesus is with us in the bread and wine and in His real presence, the forgiveness of sins is delivered and faith receives the promise of life and salvation that Christ died to give us.

“*Where is He?*” He is in his Word and He is in His Sacraments and that is why worship and Bible study are so important. In this first week of the year, many of us have made resolutions that we will struggle to keep, but the resolution to read and study the Bible and to be present in Worship are “sure things” because their success depends completely on God to do what He has promised. And in His Word and in His Sacraments He has promised to be with us!

Finally, as you consider the questions of the Wise Men, I want you to know that God is also present in His people and He has chosen to make His saving presence known through us. The question of the Wise Men is the question of the world and as people wonder “*Where is God?*” the Body of Christ can bring His presence into their lives. We love one another and work together to meet the needs of those around us *understanding that we have been blessed to be a blessing!* The Wise Men served the Christ Child by placing their gifts at his feet. Today, the gift with which you worship God is your very life. It is the vocation God has given you. It is the family in which you are a father or mother or son or daughter. It is breath you take and the books you read, it is tithe you make and it is the job to which you give yourself each day. Today’s Epistle reading tells us that God works through the Church to reveal to all mankind that through the mystery of the Gospel, we are all “members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6). And your gifts to the King are in every minute and moment of your life, and as you live out your faith in your daily calling, God is honored and Christ is present.

“*Where is He?*” In this question of the Wise Men, God is challenging us today to look for Him where He has promised to be present; to study and savor His Word; to receive His forgiveness in the Sacrament and to reflect His light into a dark world. And even when the struggles of this life leave us with doubts and fears today God is reminding us of His promise to us that He has come in the person of His Son, that He is present in His Word and that He will be with us always until the very end of the age. “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you” (Isaiah 60:1–3). Go in peace and let this light shine. Amen.

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