

Sunday, January 3, 2021
Second Sunday after Christmas (Year B)

Matthew 2.1-12

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/229693328779529>

(Sermon begins at about 13:45)

“New Beginnings”

Today we get two celebrations for the price of one. Or really, three. From a liturgical standpoint, today is the second Sunday after Christmas. Or to be more precise, this is the second Sunday after Christmas but before Epiphany. Epiphany being the start of a new liturgical season. But this day is far more than a continuation of the Christmas season, as evidenced by the theme of the Gospel reading for today. Because Epiphany falls in the middle of next week and next Sunday, by virtue of being the first Sunday after Epiphany, is the commemoration of the Baptism of Our Lord, we don't really have a clear opportunity for a Sunday celebration of Epiphany. Thankfully, the lectionary obliged and provided several possible readings for today. I obviously selected the story of the Magi precisely because it is also the designated Gospel reading for Epiphany. So, that means we get to continue our celebration of Christmas with one of the beloved images of that season—the coming of the Wise Men—and we get to (sort of) celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. And the third celebration is the fact that it is the beginning of the New Year. Always worthy of recognition, but particularly so given the year we just lived through.

While there are many themes that could be explored in the continuation of the Christmas story, and there are many themes that could be explored in the anticipation of Epiphany, these two events, combined with the New Year, share a common theme of new beginnings. And even more so, response to new beginnings. Which is something most of us are considering now that 2020 is in the rearview mirror and 2021 is finally here, full of hope and promise. Let's take a look at the new beginnings revealed in our Gospel reading—as related to both Christmas and Epiphany—and see where they take us, or what insights they have for us as we begin a new year.

The birth of Jesus in and of itself heralded a new beginning in so many ways. What happens here is so significant that it is the event that defines our demarcation of time. The time before Jesus' birth—BC for Before Christ—as opposed to the time after his birth—AD for Anno Domini, Latin for “year of our Lord.” Although truth be told, we messed that one up a bit. We now know based on historical records that Herod died in 4 BC, which means that Jesus would have been born sometime before that. Regardless, the significance is no less valid. This birth prompted the beginning of a whole new era in our reckoning of time.

Naturally, a birth in and of itself is a new beginning, holding hope and promise, not only for the new life just beginning, but for the family. Certainly, there was the joy of welcoming a new child into the family, as well as the anticipation of all the joyous times to come. And there was a

practical side, as well. In Jesus' time, families generally relied upon children as their retirement plan—as their sole means of support in their old age.

But certainly, on a much broader scale, the birth of this particular child was a new beginning unlike any other. This was the Son of God. The One we recognize as being fully human and fully divine. This had certainly never happened before. As such, this birth was a new beginning for humanity's relationship with our God. Throughout history, God had sought to be in relationship with us. From the very beginning, God tried to reach out to humanity, with limited success. Whenever God tried to be in relationship with humanity, things went well for about five minutes before we blew it and broke the one rule God established or broke a covenant or turned and started worshiping other gods. Time and again, God reached out, we blew it, and God welcomed us back. Although sometimes, not before some form of "time out" or even punishment. But we just were not getting it. We were not quite grasping how to be in relationship with God, despite God's best efforts. Despite God trying new and different things to make relationship work. Finally, God realized that for there to be true and meaningful relationship, God needed to become one of us. To live life as we do. To experience life as we do. To be in human form to provide a face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh relationship that had not previously been possible. Thus began a whole new way of relating to God. Of God relating to us. The beginning of true and authentic relationship with our God. Only made possible by the birth we celebrate at Christmas.

But there was an element of that new beginning that, while part of the plan behind the Incarnation, could not have come to fruition without the likes of the Magi in today's Gospel reading. While this new beginning was not, strictly speaking, brought about by the visit of the Magi, it is safe to say that the story of the Magi is an icon for and certainly represents another new beginning. Up until now, this God was just the God of the Jews. His sole focus was on relationship with his Chosen People. As we are told, the Magi recognized this, referring to Jesus as "the child who has been born king of the Jews." And while the coming of the Magi did not really do anything to change that—and this is where we transition into the Epiphany side of the story—the visit by the Magi is viewed as a foreshadowing of the fact that, through Jesus, a new thing would happen with God's relationship with humanity. That God would no longer just be the God of the Jewish people, but would be the God of Gentiles, as well. That God is the God of all people.

This new beginning is symbolized by the image of the Three Kings. Although we don't really know how many there were. The Gospel reading just tells us that they were "wise men from the East." The assumption has been that there were three because they brought three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the truth is, we just don't know. Tradition has it that the three kings represented other "races." Traditionally, one is depicted as being African, one is depicted as being Asian, and one is depicted as being European. Reflecting the primary races known at the time. Although the concept of race would not be developed for another millennia and a half, give or take.

In these representatives of all humanity coming to pay homage to the newborn Messiah we see the foreshadowing of the time following Jesus' death and resurrection when, thanks to the work of the likes of the Apostle Paul and others, Gentiles—non-Jews—would come to accept

this God as their own. When they would come to accept this Messiah as their own. Beginning the spread of Christianity. The beginning of this movement going from being a fringe sect of Judaism to being a religion that spans the globe. A religion that would become the largest and most widespread in the world.

The Magi set out on a journey of hope, following a star. Traveling from their home in the East into the unknown. A journey filled with hope that they would find the One who would be the savior of the world. The One who would be the fulfillment of ancient promises. A journey that revealed and foreshadowed many new beginnings that changed the world. In this new year, we set out on our own journey of hope. In that journey we are guided by our own star. Only this time, it is the One who was revealed and made known to all humanity through the star that guided the Wise Men.

In the account of the Magi, we are told that they brought gifts fitting for a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold representing wealth and power. Frankincense being used in ceremonial worship. And myrrh being used for anointing, as well as preparation for burial. All symbols indicating something of who this child was. Who he would grow up to be. Who he would become through his death and resurrection. This was their response to the miracle they were witnessing. To the new beginnings they were witnessing and participating in.

What is our response to the new beginnings we celebrate this day, this season? What gift do we bring? I'm naturally reminded of the song "The Little Drummer Boy" and the story it tells. One of my favorites. In fact, every year at Christmas I watch the 1968 Rankin and Bass stop-action production of "The Little Drummer Boy." A little cheesy now, but the message remains applicable. Maybe now more than ever. When coming upon the manger scene in Bethlehem, where the three kings have just given their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, Aaron (the little drummer boy) approaches the babe in the manger. He is embarrassed because he has no gift to bring. Certainly not like the kings. He realizes he has only one thing he can give. He plays a song for the Baby Jesus on his drum. He gave the only thing he could. He gave of himself. And that was enough. That simple gift of himself delighted the Baby Jesus. Perhaps more than the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

As we witness and participate in the new beginnings represented by this Christmas season, by Epiphany, and by this new year, we too are called to give of ourselves. To give of ourselves freely and completely. Because that is what Jesus wants most from us. And giving of that precious, priceless gift that is ourself is a profound statement of hope in what that child in the manger promises to us and all humanity.

In closing, I offer the words of 20th century German pastor and theologian Eberhard Arnold:

"The little stable at Bethlehem was the place where the love of God broke through to humankind. The wise men out of the East followed the star and discovered the place of breaking in, where the mystery of love lay in the helplessness of a human baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes in the feeding trough of an animal. They discovered the place where God's love had come down. That is the most important thing for each of us: to discover in our own

time and hour the place where God’s love has broken through, and then to follow the star that has risen for us—and to remain true to the light that has fallen into our hearts.”¹

Blessings on the new beginnings that await you this season and throughout this new year. May they be filled with hope and promise, with light and love.

¹ Eberhard Arnold, quoted in Plough “Daily Dig” email, December 27, 2020.