

## **“What Really Matters?”**

January 6, 2008

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Matthew 2:18-25

It is good to be with you again this morning after having been gone last Sunday. I appreciate Carol preaching last Sunday and to have had the opportunity to have some time away. It was an opportunity for us to be with family and do some visiting, and for the two of us to have some time alone. It is good to be back. I was visiting with my brother last week and talking with him about being away. A friend of mine had gone on sabbatical. He was near burn-out at the time when he went on sabbatical. Toward the end of that time he confessed to me that he knew it was time to retire because he did not want to go back to the church, even after having some time off.

It is good to be back with you this morning. I have Good News to share, so I'm glad you're here. I offer congratulations to each of you for your perfect attendance in the new year. I will say that again next year, so be ready for that.

This Sunday, in case you didn't know it, is known as the Feast of the Epiphany. The Feast of the Epiphany occurs in some churches every year on January 6<sup>th</sup>. It just so happens that this year January 6<sup>th</sup> falls on a Sunday. You have heard the word “Epiphany” before. It might be a sudden perception, as a “Eureka!” moment when an inventor comes up with a new invention, or it might be an intuitive grasp of meaning or perception. But in this sense, “Epiphany” to us means “manifestation” or “appearance” of a divine being.

The story we read today is of the birth of the Christ child, as visited by the Magi. There are many lessons in this story—so many that I can't cover them all today, but the first lesson is this: God reaches out to us. That is not always so. Sometimes it seems as if God is distant, removed and far away. Sometimes that distance might be because of something we have done. Sometimes that distance might be because of what God has done. Do you remember the scripture from Isaiah? In Isaiah God says, “For a moment I hid my face from you.” So there are times when God is distant from us, hidden from us, but Epiphany tells us that God reaches out to us.

There is something about God's nature that longs for us and seeks fellowship with us. God reaches out to us, and because God reaches out to us we know that with God, “All Things are Possible.” No matter what your state or condition this morning, no matter how bad things might seem, I hope that if you hear nothing else you will hear the words “God reaches out to us and because of the birth of the Christ child, we know that with God, all things are possible.”

Sadly, in our story today, we see what can happen when we read scripture in the wrong way. Literalists, both conservative and liberal, have demeaned the meaning of the story.

From where did these Magi come? Strangely enough, it is a country which we would today probably call Iran.

How many were there? We can't tell from the story. We sing "We Three Kings" because there were three gifts. Some biblical scholars say there were as many as 12 or even 20 Magi.

When did they get there? Did they get there the same night as the shepherds the way our manger scenes portray? Or, as scripture suggests, was it sometime later when Mary and "the child" (not the infant) but Mary and the child were in the house? What really matters about this story?

A few of you who are present this morning will recognize the name, Martin Marty. Martin Marty is a noted church historian in our country. He knows not only about ancient history of the church, but the present history of the church in our country today. He is a columnist for Christian Century magazine. A poll was taken one time among the readers of Christian Century magazine. The readers responded by saying that the first thing they did was open the magazine to the inside of the back cover and read Martin Marty's column. Listen to what Martin Marty said about a story such as we have today.

Marty said, "We are on the edge of mysteries that are best anticipated by heart-felt prayers rather than being argued about by doctrinaires." Don't you love that? We are in the edge of mysteries that are best anticipated by heart-felt prayers.

We need to hear Marty's words in the church. We can argue about the silliest things—this kind of music is better, no, that kind of music is better; we need to have this color of carpet in the parlor, no we need to have that color of carpet. I remember as a young boy there was an argument about which version of scripture was better. Some argued that the "Revised Standard Version" was better. Others argued that the "King James Version" was the only version. What really matters?

I have a confession to make. I am somewhat of a political junkie. I am fascinated by the political process, and even more fascinated by anyone who would want to run for President. I do find hope that if someone with a name as silly as Mitt can run for President, maybe there is hope for someone with a name as silly as Kipp.

Anyway, this past Friday I was anxious to hear the discussion of what had happened the night before in the Iowa caucuses. On the morning news programs there was some information about what had happened in Iowa, but there was as much or even more coverage about what was happening with Britney Spears. What really matters?

What really matters in this story? Did you notice that when the wise men came to Jesus they knelt? There is some kind of lesson for us there about our relationship to God, and kneeling in prayer and homage and respect. I love what Matthew says in the version I read today. It says that the Magi were "overwhelmed with joy." In another version it says, "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." They rejoiced with great joy.

How long has it been since you have known joy because of your faith in God? Honestly, how long has it been? I have shared with you before Teilhard's words that the surest sign of the presence of God is joy, but how often we go day-to-day in our mundane, routine

existence missing out on the joy that God offers. What really matters in this story?

We're reminded in our story what we have heard before, that faith is a journey. On that journey there will be the unexpected, which means that we will be called to do something that most of us hate to do, and that is change. The Magi returned home by a different way than they had planned.

We all need to change. That's why we make New Year's resolutions, because we need to change. We want to be better. If you don't need to change, I have a suggestion for you. Come up here and stand where I am standing instead of where you are sitting. But instead of reading from the Bible, write your own Bible. We all need to change. Let me give you an example.

Raise your hand if you are a Sooner fan. Do you remember back in the glory days, the Switzer days, there was a bumper sticker that said, "It's hard to be humble when you are a Sooner." It ain't so hard to be humble now, is it?

It's not hard to be humble if you are a follower of Christ. We're compared not to the person who is sitting next to us or in front of us or behind us, our brother, our sister, our mother, our father. As followers of Christ we are compared to Christ in the way we live our lives, so it's easy to be humble.

What really matters? What does Christ want from us? I don't think the Magi truly understood. What Christ really wanted from the Magi was not physical gifts—gold, frankincense, myrrh. What Christ wanted from the Magi was their love. What Christ wanted from the Magi was themselves, just as what Christ wants from us is our love and ourselves.

What really matters? Do you remember one time a lawyer asked Jesus that very question? "What is it that is most important?" Jesus said, "You know the law. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, your soul, strength, your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself." What really matters? What does Christ want from us?

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve before the early candlelight service, I went down to the entrance area by the fellowship hall. I wanted to be there in case visitors came who needed to know that the service was going to be in fellowship hall, but I wanted to be there also just to greet our own members as they came in on that sacred evening—Christmas Eve.

While I was sitting there at the desk, the phone rang. I had never answered that phone before. I didn't know how to operate it. I finally pushed a few buttons and said "Hello?" and there was a voice on the other end. You need to hear what this man said to me. "Are you having candlelight service on Christmas Eve?" he asked. I told him, "Yes, one at 5:00 and one at 11:00 p.m." Then he said, "Is anyone welcome at your service?" I believe now that this call was not only from a man who wanted to "come home" in some sense on Christmas Eve. I believe that call was from God to the church. What have we done as the church, not just our church, but as THE church, to make anyone feel that they would be unwelcome on Christmas Eve—a time when they should feel more welcome perhaps?

Is anyone welcome at your church? Perhaps our goal as a church should be to become a welcome place—a place where persons of any race, gender, sexual orientation, or socio-

economic class knows that if they are not welcome anywhere else, they will be welcome here. A welcome place, the church as a welcome place, offering healing and hope to a hurting world in which hope is in short supply. If you have ever been made to feel unwelcome in the church, too liberal, too conservative, too whatever, know that you are welcome here.

Our challenge this first Sunday of the new year is to never make secondary what Christ made primary. That is that this should be — a welcome place for all. May it be so today and forever. Amen