

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

THE SACRED JOURNEY

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January 3, 2010 Feast of the Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

The story of the Three Wise Men is so familiar to us that we need to look hard to see into it in order to understand what it means for us. Looked at from the outside by modern eyes, it seems a quaint and possibly apocryphal scene, real Christmas pageant material. Looked at from the inside, though, I think we can see something much, much bigger.

And I think it's this: In this story, we see God's response to a huge mystery, a mystery that baffled the Jews (and maybe even some other people) for centuries. The Jews' self-understanding was secure: They knew they were God's chosen people. But other things were not so clear, namely the answer to this question: How is God going to deal with the world at large? What is the trajectory of human destiny? Or, to use Paul's words in today's epistle, what exactly is God's "eternal purpose," if there is one?

And the story of the Three Wise Men begins to give an answer. It's not so important that these guys were kings. The important thing is that they were Gentiles, non-Jews. And yet they search for Jesus and they find him and when they do, they kneel before him and worship him. They give him their lives, they acknowledge that there is something or someone who stands over and above them and from whom their lives derive meaning. The Gentiles worship the God of the Jews – that's today's story. People who were

thought to be superfluous, lost, and outside the purposes of God find God. In the baby Jesus, they see him face to face, and He accepts them – contrary to everyone's expectation. And so God is revealed as God for the whole world, not only for the Jews. This had to have been a hugely surprising answer to what had been an impenetrable mystery.

King Herod also reveals part of this mystery in an almost prophetic way, because as a Jew he should have accepted Jesus. But he does not. Instead, he tries to kill him. And so we see a kind of reversal: Gentiles accept Jesus, whereas a Jew, one of his own people, rejects him. Already we sense what the future holds for Jesus. He is still in his cradle, but already we catch a glimpse of him on the cross.

And so in this story we see that mystery itself is one of the ways God works.

Sometimes I wonder whether we twenty-first-century people underestimate the place and power of mystery in our lives. We want to know; we want to understand; we want things to be clear. When we don't know something we want to know, we feel destabilized.

Kids are different. Left to their own devices (that is, when they are not over-programmed

and over-parented), kids know that life is mysterious and meant to be that way.

There was a central mystery in my own childhood and it was powerfully formative. My parents met in England during World War II. My Dad was an officer in the Army and my Mom was an Army nurse. They had what they thought of as a fairytale romance. He was the brilliant but slightly up-tight commanding officer and she was the gentle, charming nurse who persuaded him to go a little easier on his men. When the war ended they returned to the States and they wanted to marry.

There was one problem: My Dad was first-generation Irish, and my mother was first-generation Italian. Well, those of you who are familiar with the dynamics of the waves of successive immigration in our country and with the Irish hatred of Italians at that time know how my father's family reacted: Under no circumstances was he to marry my mother. Irish do not marry Italians. It was an article of faith, a genuine taboo.

But my parents were determined. My father told his family that he was going to marry my mother. They told him that if he did, they would not come to the wedding, that he would be disowned, and that they would never see him again.

They kept their word. My parents had a huge Italian wedding. Not one member of my father's family was present – not his parents, not one of his four sisters, not one cousin or uncle or aunt. I can't imagine what he felt like that day, but all the pictures of the wedding show him smiling broadly. I guess he just sucked it up.

Sucking it up didn't work all that well as a long-term solution, though.

My parents were happy enough together, but once my brother and sister and I were in grade school we were old enough to notice that there was kind of a hole in our family. We saw our Italian grandparents every week. (They never learned to speak English, so we communicated through food: the

homemade ravioli, the bean soups, the homemade red wine!). But we never saw our other grandparents, the Irish ones. We asked my father over and over again through the years why not. He refused to explain. Our mother refused to explain. It was complicated, they said; they would tell us when we were older. It was a mystery.

Among ourselves, we kids proposed various answers to this question of our invisible Irish grandparents. What could have happened that was so bad that it meant we couldn't see our own grandparents? We imagined the worst, and this was our best guess: Our father, in his rakish youth, had killed his parents. He had been in prison for a long time, and then had been released for good behavior. After which he had gone into the Army, met our mother, and so forth.

We wished he would just 'fess up and tell us. No problem. All was forgiven. We understood. We loved him.

My father didn't tell me about what had really happened until I was 18 years old. I couldn't believe he waited so long; I would have understood it when I was much younger.

But it must have been a terrible thing for him and for my mother to bear. He hadn't killed his parents, but his relationship with them had suffered a kind of death.

And his parents grimly stuck to their threat. We lived only fifty miles away from them, but I never met them and my father never saw them again. When his father died, he was not notified. He knew it had happened because a couple of weeks later he got a package in the mail with some childhood photos. The package was so badly wrapped that it was full of broken glass. I will never forget how my father looked as he stood in the kitchen with all that broken glass in his hands, looking at the photo of his Dad.

I suppose some people would accuse my parents of what we now call bad parenting in their lack of candor and in their keeping us kids completely in the dark for so long, and maybe even fault them for not trying harder

to reconcile with the stubborn Irish grandparents. But I don't think of it that way at all. In fact, even when the truth about my grandparents was still kept from me, even as I knew that something important to my life was an enormous secret – or perhaps because of these things - I realized that life is imperfect. And that that imperfection was somehow part of its beauty. I saw that in the place where connection and relationship should be, there was a huge gash that ran deeply into everything that was, a kind of wound of love, but love nonetheless. I didn't realize that because someone told me; I realized it because I saw it being lived out in my family. Life was a great mystery that was waiting to be unveiled, a mystery that was tinged with both grief and expectation.

Now, as an adult, sometimes I think that that is what the whole story of Scripture is about: grief and expectation. The grief of the world that suffers so much pain that is yet unredeemed; and the expectation that as St. Paul says, God will make it all make sense, that his eternal purpose is to bring all things and all people into a kind of unity, or resolution, or reunion, that we can only glimpse in this life.

I suppose Paul's phrase about our being "members of the same body" says it all. In real life, that's hard to sense. There is so much disconnection in the world, on every level – witness my own small family, and perhaps yours, and on a much larger scale among the peoples and nations of the earth. But I think there are moments when we can sense the truth of this "one body-ness" of which Paul speaks.

I once served at a large parish in the city that had suffered 20 years of extreme dissension. Loads of people not talking with each other anymore, lots of conflict at every level, lots of very destructive anger of long standing. On Sunday evenings after the 6:00pm service at this parish, we had a meditation group that met for an hour.

The interesting thing about this group was that it drew people from the several warring factions in the parish. It wasn't a large

group, only about 12 or 15 people. We stuck to a routine for the group – similar to the routine we use here at St. Mark's – 10 minutes of teaching, an opening prayer, then 20 minutes of meditation, then a closing prayer – and that worked well because it provided the structure we needed to keep everyone behaving themselves.

One Sunday night I was feeling especially whipped and I couldn't wait for the hour to be over. As timekeeper for the meditation period, I had to look at my watch occasionally and on this particular evening I looked at it prematurely a couple of times. The second time I checked my watch, I happened to look up also at the group itself. Everyone was praying. Their eyes were closed, their heads bowed. Their faces were in repose; they didn't know anyone was looking. And I sensed something so powerful. It was as if a light had enveloped them and was holding them all. Their faces were beautiful in that light. The words "we are one" came to my mind. Even though there were enemies in that room, I *knew* that there was something much deeper, much more real, holding us together. We were one.

And so the great mystery of which St Paul speaks in today's epistle is opened to all of us on Epiphany. We know now that the God of the Jews, the God of Jesus, is our God and God for all people – whoever they are, wherever they are, whatever they are going through. We know now that whatever life brings us, the joys and the sorrows, the broken glass and the moments of light, it is part of our journey to that God, a journey that for each of us is no less sacred than the journey the Three Wise Men made.

When all our stories have ended, and when time itself is no more, when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, may we all see him face to face and know the deepest truth of God: That He restores all things, He reunites all things through his son, and that inside *His* story, we will all know that we are one.

Amen.

