

Sermon Epiphany 2018: Encountering the Living God

Introduction: Remember to be Empowered by the Holy Spirit

Every year at St. David's, we pick a theme or a focus of some aspect of the Christian life;

So that we may grow in our faith and in our Christian walk;

As we live into our mission to know God in Jesus Christ

And make Christ known to others as individual and as a community.

And this year's theme, which we introduced in September is *Empowered by the Holy Spirit*;

Empowered by the Spirit acknowledges the presence and power of God at work in our lives;

It reminds us that God has given each of us an incredible gift;

The gift of God's Spirit so that we do not have to seek after God

Or become better Christians on our own;

Because God's Spirit is empowering us every moment of every day;

To experience God and to become the persons God is calling each of us to be.

I don't know about you, but this Christianity thing, this Christian walk

Is impossible to accomplish on my own;

I wake each day with every intention of being a good Christian;

And on far too many days, I forget what I'm about

And too often try to live as a Christian on my own

And apart from God's leading and God's influence

But through the Holy Spirit at work in my life and in your life;

We can come to know God in Jesus Christ and live in God's presence each day

As we become powerful ambassadors of God's love and grace here at St. David's

And out there in the world through our daily lives.

Oh, we all fall and fail, but the Spirit always lifts and renews us to begin again in our following.

Epiphany and the Three Magi

And that's who we are looking at this Sunday, these wise ones;

We're looking at three people who have been touched

And empowered by the Holy Spirit in some tangible way;

And are on a journey to draw closer to God

To seek after God and to come to Bethlehem to offer the gifts of their lives:

To offer the gift of their lives in person and in the signs of the gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Today we celebrate the Epiphany, we celebrate God in our midst through the coming of Christ;

Now, the actual date in the Church calendar is January 6;

But since we're not in the practice of coming to church on Saturdays too very often

We moved the celebration to today

Because these three wise ones have a great deal to say about God's desire for all people;

And how you and I might allow the Holy Spirit

A little more room in our lives to become better followers of Jesus Christ.

In the traditions that have come down through time about the wise men or the wise ones;

We've come to think of them as three people, since there are three gifts;

There very well could have been more, but the tradition of three has stuck.

They've received names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar;

And they've come to represent the different kinds of people in the world;

Not just the Jews who were promised the Messiah, but people from all over the world

Whom God is seeking and who are welcomed by God into God's presence.

The wise men have been characterized as kings;

And while we don't know if they are actually kings, they are persons of some importance

Because King Herod and the all of Jerusalem wouldn't have cared about

Three nobodies who had come to seek the one born to be King of the Jews.

Kings or not, the three wise ones cause a big stir with King Herod and the religious leadership
Because the star they had been following would have suggested to everyone
That God was getting ready to change the world in some powerful way;
And those in power aren't always so ready to give up power, not even to God.

The term "wise men" also indicates that they were well educated, religious or holy men;
And like many people of the time, they were interested in the stars,
Both as astronomers and as astrologers;
The three were people who were educated and expert
In seeking the wisdom and guidance of the heavens in a culture
That put great reliance on reading the stars.

They were seeking God by reading the stars and when they saw this important star
They walked away from their lives and followed it.

Now, for those of us interested in the science of the star itself, we don't know very much;
It may have been a comet making its orbit through our solar system;
Though not Haley's comet because that came through in 12 B.C.

Some records indicate that the light in the sky may have been an unusual alignment
Of Saturn and Jupiter or it may have been a star in an unusual place in the sky;
Craig Laird, in our choir, laughingly states that it was not the North Star, Polaris;
Because they would have ended up walking around in a big circle;
Since the North Star is fixed in our sky.

Whatever sign was in the sky, it was important enough for them;
To leave their lives behind and follow it to find the newborn king.

It's a stirring drama: magi, kings, wise ones, representing all of the world;
Some remarkable sign in the heavens drawing them to the child in Bethlehem;
And though we can never know with certainty about their true identities;
We know three things about them that may help us
Become better followers of Christ in our lives today.

Wise Ones and Following Christ

First, we know that they were seeking after God in their lives;
Of all the things they thought were important, God was highest on their lists;
And they wanted to know God and experience God's presence in their lives;
And that's why they studied the stars so carefully, to find signs from God.

Most of us don't take signs in the night sky or astrology as our first and best choice
For finding God in our lives, though some do;
Instead, we have closer guides like the Bible and prayer and church;
And especially other Christians who serve as real time guides.

But how God makes His presence known to us and touches us with the Spirit;
Is never as important as our desire to seek after God;
You and I have no control over God making Himself known to us;
But when we seek God with all our hearts, He will always find us;
And will find us in ways that we will know it is truly God.

And so, like the wise ones, you and I are called to live each day with the hope and desire
Of seeking after God, of looking for God at work in our lives.

Second, we know that the wise men were persons of action and determined action at that;
They saw the star and they followed it;
They followed expecting to reach their goal of finding the newborn king.

Theirs might have been a foolish adventure at times, following a star in the night sky;
I can imagine how some people might have wondered about the sanity
Of the wise men and their followers when they tried to describe what they were doing.

But it must not have mattered to them what others thought because they persevered
Until the star they followed rested over the place where Jesus lay;
They knew their journey was somehow complete
As they came into the presence of the living God in human form.

Time and again, you all have heard me say that the spiritual life with God
Always follows the physical life, always follows some committed action on our part.

When you and I take action and say our prayers, for instance, God answers;
When we take action and read the Bible, we learn the sound of God's voice;
When we determinedly act in ways to show our love for God
And our love for others, we become loving people ourselves;
And when we invite the Holy Spirit into our lives,
The Spirit comes.

And finally, as people empowered by the Holy Spirit,
We live in the hope that God will change us and change our lives;
The three wise men were transformed by their encounter with the Christ child;
These three powerful people knelt and paid homage
And gave over signs of their lives: gold, frankincense and myrrh;

And warned in a dream, when back home, back to their lives by a different way;
Changed by the Spirit touching their lives.

Coming into the nearer presence of God has a way of changing us;

Change, transformation comes to us, not by our doing, but by the hand of God;

We don't become better followers of Jesus Christ, of God, on our own;

God works in us; God touches us; and God surrounds us sometimes

With a love and a grace and a peace that are life changing.

An Invitation

And so as we begin a new calendar year and celebrate the appearance of God in our midst

On this Sunday of the Epiphany;

I invite you to open your life anew to the Holy Spirit;

Live your life like the wise men:

Seek after God in your life;

Take actions that reflect your seeking after God;

Allow God to change you.

We have so much more knowledge and reason than the wise men to seek after the light;

Knowing that the child they met in Bethlehem grows up to be the Savior of the world;

So seek after God in your life with all your heart and God will find you;

Act in a determined way through study and prayer and service to others

And God will welcome you into His presence;

Allow room for God and the Spirit will transform your life.

Then, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we will truly know God in Jesus Christ

And will make Him known to others by the way we live and love each day.

Amen.