

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“A Compelling Church”

The first in a series for the season after Epiphany

Matthew 2: 1-2

January 4, 2004

I begin this morning with a simple and heart felt proclamation, **“Happy New Year.”** It is a wish for you and it is something I feel about this particular time. It’s a great time. I know there’s plenty wrong with the world and plenty about life that is painful... but still... I think this is a wonderful time to be alive and to be on a person of faith.

Christianity always exists in time. It takes shape in time and space and in history’s story. There’ve been many chapters to the story and I think this chapter we’re in is a great chapter to be a part of. And I also think we have a church that is right for this chapter.

I’m so glad to be here. At DaySpring, in Waco, in 2004. I’ve been a person of faith all my life... and I’ve never been more interested in the journey than I am now.

I’ve been involved in church work for over a quarter of a century, and I’ve never been more excited about what a church can be as I am now.

I’ve been studying theology all my adult life and never been more convicted about the path that Christianity invites us to. It’s a great time to be a Follower...

There is so much available to us...

There is great openness and awareness...

There is a capacity to move across old lines
and embrace new things.

Some folks call this era, Post-Modernity... whatever you want to call it, it is a time of unique challenges and unique opportunity.

So it is also for our church... We are so lucky... blessed. What an opportunity we have... our particular journey, intersecting as it does with this time. DaySpring in 2004 is a good thing. We fit this time like a glove.

We are relatively unencumbered...light on our feet.

A brand new facility which is so inviting and different...

We enjoy a diversity here... and an openness... and joy.

I’m so excited and convinced that we as a community of faith can respond to what God is doing in this time.

The Christian experience is always one of graceful convergence between God’s activity and our response to it. It begins with God and then we are invited into an eternal movement.

God leaves a clue... God manifests something. That’s what the word Epiphany means. Manifestation. So, you don’t really have an Epiphany... it’s not really something you do. An Epiphany dawns on you. The light bulb comes on. The awareness wasn’t there and now it is.

Something is disclosed... unveiled.

So we celebrate Epiphany to remind ourselves that God is prone to leaving clues all over the place... providing disclosures of all sorts. As mysterious as God remains... God also steps out from behind the mystery in big ways now and then... and in small ways everyday, God is manifested.

The light bulb comes on...

You weren't aware of God's presence and then you are.

Something is revealed.

That is one of the major tenants of Biblical faith, isn't it? Open the Bible to almost any place and you'll see God stepping out in big and small ways to say **this is who I am**. Our initiative is never primary.

Biblical faith is that the Divine makes the first move. God breaks the silence... **"The Lord said to Abraham, leave your country and your people."** God shows up... in a burning bush out in the desert. God is the initiator... **"The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah saying, 'I knew you...'"** Paul... **"Maybe you've heard about the mystery made known to me."**

In Biblical faith we don't stumble our way out of darkness... God's light breaks into the darkness... with an epiphany and we respond. How we respond says a lot about who we are as people of faith... about the kind of faith that we have and we need for this time.

I'm going to use the time from now until Lent to speak to this issue. I think I'll call the series, **"A Compelling Faith."** What will our faith look like and what kind of church will it create? God reveals... how will we respond?

For today and this sermon and for us, the magi make great models. I have points today... (once a year, I have points... take notes if you like... make an outline, even.)

First of all (Roman Numeral I), I think the faith and the church for this time will be centered in reverent belief and not cynical doubt or arrogant certainty.

These magi were open to the mystery of things. They saw the world a certain way... it was connected. Something going on in the sky meant something was going down on earth. They knew reality to be one, unified.

It wasn't dualistic,

natural and supernatural.

It was all supernatural.

It was alive and connected.

They revered their world inside and out. See a star... and wonder what's up. Have a dream... and assume the Divine is speaking telling them to "go home by another way." This is the perspective of the magi. An understanding of the interior life and of the cosmos which framed the way they saw everything. They looked at the world and they looked at life and they felt awe.

That's the kind of faith we can have and the kind of church we can be. Centered in reverent belief. Not in a kind of arrogant certainty or a cynical doubt... Those are two sides of the same coin, I think. Both products of rationalism and both temptations we face... certainty and cynicism. Rather than revering the mystery, we stand above and pretend to know.

To say our ideas about God are perfect... is the way of the fundamentalism, it looks very secure and confident and faithful but it I don't think it is. It's replaced the Great Mystery with dogma. It replaces the Absolute with absolutes.

The way of the cynic is the other side of the modernity coin. Where we're tempted to say, **"We know, this or that cannot be true... The world only works according to our formulas. We know..."** For the cynic, the world isn't enchanted or enchanting. It's static and mechanical and not very fun.

That's not the magi's world... and doesn't have to be ours. A church filled with people of reverent belief, will be a compelling church in this time. It will be an open-minded place, that looks for signs of God's involvement. It assumes epiphany but never the ability to interpret the epiphany with perfection. It assumes God speaks but is humble about what it hears.

A church like this sees a world that can be impacted by who we are and what we do... by our compassion and our action and our praying... why? Because the world is enchanted. It's a "luminous web" according to Barbara Brown Taylor. You exist, we exist and do church in the reality that is God.

So, when you walk in the door of this compelling church, you assume that the others who walk in with you aren't necessarily here by accident. Everything is more than it seems. There's no incidental moment... everything is sacred... it's all filled with God and sacramental. It's conveying God.

If you're taking notes, put a Roman Numeral II down. **The second thing... about a faith and a church for this time, is that it will be moved along by a passion to know God and not driven by fear or anger.**

The wise guys are our model.

What propels them?

What gets them up on those camels?

They are passionate about seeing... honoring... worshipping. They want to see what is happening... what is being born into the world. That's the draw to Bethlehem. They're moving towards the light... towards the epiphany with passion.

They aren't driven, as some Christians seem to be, by fear. By the need to protect and guard... They aren't fearful of the culture... or someone who's different. Lot's of religion gets driven by fear and anxiety.

A lot of religion is also driven by anger. Lots of us moderates have been really made at the fundamentalists. I don't really want to fight the fundamentalists. A lot of the conservatives are really mad at the secularists. I want to be in pursuit of God. I don't really want to fight a culture war... I want to see God.

The first commandment is to love God with all that we are. This commandment gets shelved a lot in the name of all sorts of agendas.

A church that is moved first by a passion to find God, will be a compelling church for this time. It will be so because it will be centered in the main thing. It'll be compelling because this kind of searching tends to result in joy. Any other agendas have a way of poisoning us.

I know there are times to be prophetic but if we don't have experiencing God as our passion... those other agendas become crusades and witch hunts and hang like a cloud over a community. We can only speak to the world from position of connection to God. Not from anger and not from anxiety.

There has to be a certain joyful and graceful sound to what we say... if it's not there, we have no good news. We have no gospel... we're just flag waving. Our time needs a joyful gospel.

Roman Numeral III. A faith and a church for our time will be grounded in the Tradition and not in traditionalism or in trends.

These ancients who made their way to Judea were people of a Tradition... wisdom teachers, no doubt. They were a part of a stream of thought that has run through time and through culture and through various religions.

Wisdom involves a way of knowing and teaching... a way of apprehending and incorporating. It involves planting deeply into a way of thought and being... which is a Tradition with a capital T.

These magi believed there was a wisdom in the fabric of life, which had been discovered and passed on. When they got to Jerusalem... they went looking for teachers who could help them to make sense out of what they were experiencing.

Being grounded in the Tradition... is a way of honoring what God has revealed and the way God has worked. It assumes a process that is sacred.

We're a part of a great Tradition. That's not the same as traditionalism. Traditionalism is concerned with what kind of hymns are sung and when the service starts and who takes up the offering and such... It says, **"This is the way it's always been done."** Traditionalism.

The Tradition is a story... it involves what is ancient and not what is trendy. It is concerned with Truth and not with function. Trends and traditions are about function. The Tradition reflects a larger reality that grounds us.

Our Tradition... and I mean by that the Christian tradition... is very large... larger and deeper and wider than most of us know. Some of us grew up believing that Lottie Moon was the first real Christian.

We were Baptist...

or Presbyterian...

or Lutheran.

Folks... these are only limbs on branches on forks of a huge Christian tree... and the entire tree belongs to us.

It does mean something to me to know what Baptists believed in the 16th century... but I can't ignore the first 15 centuries. That's my heritage as well. My spiritual ancestors are Anglican Catholics and Roman Catholics and Celtic Mystics and Greek Orthodox. And even before those existed... there were Christian groups and churches... trying to understand what it meant to follow Jesus.

It's a large tradition. When we ground ourselves in the Tradition, it doesn't narrow the playing field, it broadens it and moves us beyond our provincial traditionalisms and our trendiness. The entire Tradition belongs to us and we can learn from it all.

It will encourage you, I think... to learn that followers of Christ for centuries have wrestled with and written about any question you can ponder. The nature of humankind... The meaning of the cross... What's makes the bible sacred... How to pray... How to worship... How to read the Bible. What is salvation?

We shouldn't assume that we need to make things up as we go along... nor should we assume that the theology we learned in Vacation Bible School is the summation of Christian thought. It was probably just a twig on a limb on a branch on a fork of this great big tree.

There is much to look at and to learn... and a church that identifies with The Tradition, capital T, and grounds itself there will be compelling in this new time of ours.

Well, last on the outline... Roman Numeral IV. **A faith and a church for our time will involve a community of pilgrims and not isolated wayfarers or stationary souls.**

There were magi... plural... If there had only been one, it'd would have been **"a madge came from the East came looking."** It was magi. They brought three gifts but we don't know whether there were two or two hundred. All we know is that they made a trip and that they didn't make it alone. A community of pilgrims... traveling and traveling together.

We face two temptations... either not to travel... to stay put... or to travel but travel alone. Neither will suffice.

You have to move. Our faith is a Semitic faith... it was born in the desert and in the desert if you don't move... you die. There's no life standing still... remaining static. The original followers of Jesus weren't called Christians, they were called people of the Way. They were walking a certain path.

Saints throughout the ages have written about this and when they have we see that there are always levels of maturity and progress. There are degrees of consciousness and awareness and understanding and integration. There are stages and places... and you have to leave one to get to the next. You have to move out of the safety of a womb in order to be born...

Which always involves some risk... some change... disturbance. We can't just stay with what is comfortable. A womb won't do forever... we'll die... our faith will die if we aren't on a pilgrimage. You can't stay put... not in what you think or experience.

We are pilgrims... but pilgrims together... because we're certain to get lost without one another. You can't get to Jesus alone. Community is always a part of the process. We have to journey together in authentic ways, otherwise when we get tired we'll give up.

We have to have fellow pilgrims because out there on the way, we'll get to some new territory and won't have map... and you just can't draw your own map... you just can't. If you travel alone you're bound to be lost.

Well, that's the end of this outline but it's is just the beginning of our thinking... we'll think more about this in the weeks to come. For now, I say to you, "Happy New Year, DaySpring." This is an exciting time and we're privileged to be a part of it. We have an opportunity... to be a compelling church, reverently believing, passionately seeing, deeply grounded, but on the way and on the way together. Amen?

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