

More Light

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 2, 2021, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

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I know it's really the ninth day of Christmas and that Christmas doesn't end for another three days. Nonetheless, we're celebrating Epiphany today.

Epiphany is the feast in the church calendar that marks the arrival of the Magi to pay homage to the infant Jesus. *Epiphany* also has a secular meaning: "a moment in which you suddenly see or understand something in a new or very clear way."¹ I don't know which meaning came first, and I don't suppose it really matters – at least not for this sermon. This sermon is about having epiphanies (with a small "e") from scripture, and I'll use the Epiphany (with a big "E") story from Matthew's gospel as an example.

My dad sent me a DVD for Christmas. It's of a documentary from the PBS series, *American Experience*, about the Pilgrims.² I care about this both personally and professionally. Personally, I care because my (something like) 14th great-grandparents were John Alden, who was a crewmember aboard the *Mayflower*, hired as the ship's cooper and who stayed in the new colony, and Priscilla Mullins, one of the Pilgrims and the only member of her family to survive the first winter of 1620-1621. Professionally, I care because the Pilgrims and the subsequent influx of Puritans became the Congregationalists, who became part of the United Church of Christ, one of the denominations to which our congregation belongs. That means that the story of the Pilgrims is a story about our spiritual roots.

A verse in the Bible that became important to the Pilgrims and the separatist movement in England was Matthew 18:20 – Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." There's no mention of the need for priests or bishops. All that's needed for Jesus to be present is for a handful of people to gather in his name. At least that's what the Pilgrims heard. That's the epiphany the Pilgrims had when they read this verse. The church, it seemed, could be free of hierarchy. And if the church could be free of hierarchy, that meant the church could be free of its head, namely the king of England. This separatist movement that desired to separate from the Church of England might one day desire to separate from the rulership of the king.

Needless to say, those in political power were not too keen on this movement. By 1607, these separatists needed to leave England altogether, and they moved to Holland, first settling in Amsterdam, and then in Leyden.³ In Holland, they were free to worship as they desired, and what they desired was to create a community that was like the first Christian communities described in the Bible. (Incidentally, this desire to create a church

¹ Merriam-Webster online dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany>.

² Information about *The Pilgrims* can be found at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/pilgrims/>.

³ Now spelled "Leiden."

that mirrored the first Christian communities was the impetus for the movement over 200 years later that led to the creation of the Disciples of Christ, our other denomination.)

But there were problems in Holland. First, their children were becoming Dutch, and these separatists who had gathered around the Rev. John Robinson saw themselves as staunchly English. Second, being foreigners, their job prospects were not that good. Eventually, some of the group felt it made sense to try to establish a colony in America. It took them a while both to gain permission (a charter from the king) and financing (from the 17th century version of venture capitalists). In 1620, a small group of them headed across the English Channel to board a boat called the *Mayflower* to sail the America.

Before they left Holland, John Robinson preached a final sermon. The text of the sermon does not exist (at least as far as I now). However, it was summarized, and the summary includes these sentences: “[Robinson] charged us before God and his blessed Angels, to follow him [Robinson] no further then [sic] he followed Christ. And if God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of his, to be as ready to receive it, as ever we were to receive any truth by his [Robinson’s] Ministry: For he was very confident the Lord had more truth and light yet to breake [sic] forth out of his holy Word.”⁴

To understand the importance of these words to the Pilgrims, it is important to understand that Robinson was the most crucial mentor for the whole group of Pilgrims – those who established Plimouth Plantation, those who joined them in the subsequent years, and those who stayed behind in Leyden.⁵ He was instrumental in creating the community and then in its breaking apart so this new colony could be established. His belief that God was still speaking, that God was still revealing light and truth was and remains a spiritual hallmark of our tradition.

This is one of the reasons it is so important that we engage with scripture. It is only when we engage with scripture that more truth and light can emerge from it. A way to start is by remembering that, though the Bible looks like a single volume, it is actually a mini library and we should read it that way. When the Bible is read as if they are one text, some important things need to be ignored to make sure it is cohesive – like the fact that there are two very different creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis, or that Matthew and Luke (for instance) have very different narrative priorities and very different original audiences when they tell their versions of the stories about Jesus.

I know that there are Christians who, as Richard Rohr put it, “want to pretend that the Bible fell fully produced from heaven in a zip-top bag,”⁶ as if it entered the world unmediated by human writers, human errors, and human limit, or that it was not influenced by historical or cultural contexts. This view tends to want to remove the final “s”

⁴ From the Account of Robinson’s Farewell Address to the Pilgrims upon their Departure from Holland, 1620, by Edward Winslow in his “Hypocrisie Unmasked,” printed in 1646, *Liberty Fund*, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/robinson-words-of-john-robinson-robinsons-farewell-address-to-the-pilgrims> (accessed 1 January 2022).

⁵ According to historian Susan Hardman Moore, speaking in the documentary *The Pilgrims, op. cit.*

⁶ Richard Rohr, *What Do We Do With the Bible?* (Albuquerque: Center for Action and Contemplation, 2018), 32.

from the term “scriptures,” and make it scripture. It ignores the reality that the Bible is a library, not a single volume.

This zip-top bag approach to the scriptures can easily lead to literalism. If the Christian scriptures came to humanity from heaven directly, it must be error-free. God wouldn't give us scriptures with errors. And if it's error-free, then it must mean exactly what it says. And if it means exactly what it says and is error-free, then *my* understanding of that “exactly what it says” will surely also be error-free. And that is extremism.

And extremism is dangerous.

“Extremism,” writes Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston, “is a centrifugal force. It constantly seeks to draw what is in the center out toward the edges. It pulls societies, communities, apart. It divides through the pressure of fear. It seduces through suspicion.”⁷ The danger, Christian scholar of the Hebrew scriptures Walter Brueggemann reminds us, is “that ‘final readings’ are toxic and eventually lead to ‘final solutions.’”⁸

Truth be told, almost all people who grow up in Christianity start with this sort of a literalist approach to scripture. That can be because we grow up in a faith community that uses this approach, or it can be as simple as the fact that when we are young, our brains interpret things concretely. Our brains haven't developed the capacity for abstract and symbolic thinking. Luckily, we grow.

I like how John Dominic Crossan, a contemporary Christian theologian and scholar, put it: “My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.”⁹

Instead of the literal reading of Christian scriptures, a much better approach is a metaphorical-historical reading.¹⁰ Our task is to figure out, as best we can, how the ancient communities that produced and lived by these stories understood them. And if we can't figure that out, we can at least ask questions, for questions can lead us to truth and light. And that is important because our goal is to understand what these stories might have to say to us about our lives and our faith journeys today.

I spent some time this past week engaging with today's scripture. I wondered how Matthew's first audience might have heard these words. What sense would they, a predominately Jewish community, make of this story of foreigners, of people who practiced a religion that did not worship the God of the Jews, coming to pay homage to their infant savior? Would the story for them be about a question that might have been lingering, the question about whether followers of Jesus needed to see themselves as Jews?

⁷ Steven Charleston, *Facebook* post, <https://www.facebook.com/steven.charleston.5/posts/10201926817639073> (posted and accessed 31 July 2013).

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 6.

⁹ John Dominic Crossan, quoted online and in memes, sometimes citing his book *Who Is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions About the Historical Jesus*.

¹⁰ For more on this approach to reading scripture (Jewish and Christian), I highly recommend Marcus Borg's *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*.

While that is more a question than an answer, it led me to some truth and light for my time. These foreigners, these people who practiced a religion not like mine, knew some deep truth, a truth that I would attribute to God. They knew that, somehow, this peasant child was the Messiah, God's anointed. Even if this story is not historical (and I believe it is not historical), it reminds me that people with religions that are different from mine may know some truth about which I am not yet aware. That is an important bit of light for me to remember.

The story also reminded me of something Saint Augustine once said: that God has given us two "books" that reveal who God is and what God is about. These are the Book of Nature (that is, the natural world itself) and the Book of Scripture, (that is, the Bible). The Magi, these wise men, learned the truth by studying the stars, by engaging with the Book of Nature. It might be good for me to spend a little more time reading the Book of Nature.

Like John Robinson, I believe that God has yet more truth and light to break forth from both sacred books. And I believe that the truth and light will only break forth when we engage with the texts. Amen.

Questions for reflection:

- When have you experienced God's truth and light breaking forth from the sacred texts?
- How are you engaging with the sacred texts these days?