

What Spiritual Growth Will Require

A sermon by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones

Sunday of The Epiphany / January 6, 2018

Matthew 2:1-2

If you want to grow spiritually,
if you are restless in your life of faith and sense
that something more is possible,
this is a good time.

I don't just mean because it's a new year.

I'm referring also to this season in the church
calendar, on this Epiphany Sunday.

Epiphany is a good time to ask how your faith can
become more life-giving, more life-changing,
more vivid.

I know that in this new year, I find myself less
interested in ordinary resolutions, more interested
in living with bigger intentions and goals,
more than a tweak here or an adjustment there.

I think I read a similar desire from the culture
around us, an interest in deeper realities,

not just resolutions.

Take Weight Watchers, the decades-old organization that helps people get trimmer.

They have changed their branding,

their name, even. Now they are WW.

Not WW for *Weight Watchers*, but WW for their

new slogan: *Wellness that works*.

WW means not just conquering bad eating habits,

in other words, but forging a more whole,

balanced life.

So how *do* we become more fully alive--alive to

God, better grounded in our faith?

I want us as a Cathedral to think in that

larger-picture way, too.

The RenewalWorks process we are engaging in

will help us in that. We are learning from the

survey more about your desire for spiritual

growth, and how we can address it in some

exciting ways.

I want us to give more focus to spiritual growth.

to give keener attention to a vibrant faith.

To do so, we all will need two things:
a little sweat and a lot of grace.

To go further along in your faith, you will have to
have both some grit and a gift.
Sustained effort and a personal epiphany or two.

That's what I see in the wise men.

This two-fold dynamic.

I'm struck by this passage, have been all week:
“wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,
asking, "Where is the child who has been born
king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its
rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

They came, they searched, but note: it wasn't a
little walk in a park on some spare afternoon.

Like I said, it takes effort. Focused effort.

Their journey would be fraught with setbacks and
challenges, including an
alarming encounter with Herod.

And it took them longer to travel
than you might think.

We are not told how much time elapsed long once
they had seen the star,
but Matthew's note about Herod's order to kill all
children two years old and younger indicates an
extended period.

It took them a while to get there.
They were not with Jesus at the same time as the
shepherds.

It took some patient traveling.
The magi were philosophers, teachers and
instructors of Persian kings.

And they read the sky for signs. Like virtually all
in the ancient world, they believed
that the movements of the stars,
with all the sky's order and precision,
revealed insights about life below.

If a brilliant star appeared,
then they would have asked,
is a divine hand breaking into the normal design
to announce some special thing?

We don't know what they saw, of course.
About 7 B.C. there was a brilliant conjunction of
Jupiter and Saturn.

Perhaps God did something more directly
miraculous.

Whatever caught their attention, they set out.
And if they came from Persia, or from Babylonia,
the seat of ancient astronomical studies, it was
hundreds of miles to Jerusalem.

It took the Old Testament prophet Ezra and the
caravan he was traveling with four months to
traverse the nearly 900 miles.

The distance, the effort, will not deter them.
The lengths they had to go didn't stop them.

That's grit!

And there is something even more impressive
about them.

A sign in the heavens was all it took to make them
strike out. They knew Jesus only from what had
been revealed in nature, and that revelation was
not as strong as what had been revealed to the
nation of Israel in their Scriptures.

It's not just how much you know, then,
but what you do with it.

How you work it.

The commitment you bring to it.

What matters isn't
whether we grew up going to church,
whether our family worshipped here for
generations,
whether we can answer every hard question.

What matters is a determined movement from
casual to committed.

The wise men, the magi, give honor and worship
when others, by their indifference or
complacency,
couldn't be bothered,

didn't even notice.

What plans are you making to make this year a
year of growth in your faith,
your generosity, your love of God?

Why settle for something pale and boring?

What are you going to do to grow a richer, more
mature faith?

Today: ask yourself, what will I do this year to
grow?

If you are going only on what you learned in 3rd
grade Sunday school, or junior high youth group
when you were young,
you aren't going to go far.

If you think an hour or so a week in worship is
enough to ground you for the challenge,
I'd ask you to think again.

Not when we have the challenges of adult life.
Not with the gritty realities of living a costly faith.
Not with hard and even harrowing things that
happen in the world, in our everyday worlds.

But, here's the second point,
it's not all up to us.
Thank God, literally, that it's not.

There is something behind
that grit in our story.
Before the wise men were willing to make their
long journey to the manger,
the wise men were shown something.

They were given the gift of a glimpse, remember,
a glimmering star.

We need that, or something similar, too.

To keep us moving ahead.

We need to pay attention to the God who show up
in our lives, too.

The Catholic theologian Richard Rohr
defines an epiphany as
“a flashing-out, a showing-forth,
a sudden appearance” of God

that is so unsought, so surprising,
that we're caught off guard.

(online article, *Epiphany: You Can't Go Home
Again*)

So the wise men got that.
They kept getting guidance, kept watching.
And God led them to the Christ child.
“On entering the house, they saw the child with
Mary his mother.”

What they witnessed there was even more
astonishing than the star.

The coming of Jesus was an epiphany –
a flashing-out, a showing-forth,
an unexpected appearance of God.
A gift that so captured their imaginations that they
were forever set on a journey of faith.

In fact, when the ancient church
celebrated Epiphany,
it celebrated it as a foreshadowing of all that God
would reveal through Christ.

During Epiphany,
the ministers announced all of the church year's
feast and seasons:

Ash Wednesday, Lent, East and Pentecost –
Epiphany pointed to, proclaimed it all.

Because all of Christ's life was an epiphany, a
gift.

Everything Christ was about to say and do would
startle the world.

With him came a new revelation
of God's love for people.

Good news. Great news. Amazing news.

Christ's coming was remarkable.

It is remarkable.

And the world, in the form of Persian scholars,
was invited to notice and pay attention.

And the world, in the form of us,

here today,

is invited to see again and again.

To look past our trite distractions and anxious
busyness and see the wonder of it all.

We too can gaze on the presence of One who can
make all the difference.

So yes, there's work. Grit.

But also a gift. Grace.

“When they saw that the star had stopped,”
Matthew tell us, when their journeying was about
to experience its destination, “they were
overwhelmed with joy.”

I love that glimpse. Overwhelmed with joy?

It's possible!

In the midst of the ordinariness of a child's birth,
even in the midst of their road-worn weariness,
they found God's wondrous purposes breaking in.

There's something for us there, too.

For we need a gift of grace amid the grit.

My good friend Kevin had a hard year.
His wife went through two spinal surgeries,
and still has more surgery to come.

His sister-in-law died suddenly.

Just before Thanksgiving, he was diagnosed with
Parkinson's Disease. But this is what he said in
his Christmas letter:

“At the end of a year like this, we feel more
deeply how astonishing it is that Jesus entered our
world, [this kind of world]
knowing what it would mean for him.
But he came to be with each
one of us and to save us.”

God broke into our world,
shone forth in our little lives,
our sometimes joyful sometimes sorrowful lives.

And he continues to do so.
So we watch the unfolding story of God's coming
in Christ, its everyday wonders.

What a gift to be here pondering it, basking in it.
What a gift to grow
deeper in our knowledge of this.
Not that vivid faith will come instantly or easily
when you set out to grow.

We may trudge through months—or even years—
when little seems to happen.

Other times we will find ourselves
intoxicated by God, filled with the Holy Spirit,
caught up and swept along.

It is not we alone who pray,
but a Greater One who shows up, prays in us,
carries us along.

So even if it takes some doing,
to pray, worship, serve, do our part,
when we pause to look at the magi,
see their joy, their delight in Jesus,
it's hard not to want the same.