

SERMON- Epiphany (B)
Charles R. Cowherd

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Isaiah 60:1-6 ————— Psalm 72:1-7,10-14 ————— Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

OPENING:

If one were to give a child the following objects.....

a baseball, a baseball glove, a basketball and a hoop.... and then ask him or her to put 2 in one box, and 2 in another, what would you expect the child to do?

If I were to ask *you* the same question, how would *you* group those items, the baseball, the basketball, the baseball glove and the basketball hoop.

This is my very *unscientific* survey.

But... how one groups these objects reveals something about who you are, whether you see the world by its parts (putting the balls together) or by their function (putting each sport together).

Here is a harder one, again 4 words, and how do you group them?

“Religion” “science” “magic” “technology”

Which of those belong together?

Again the 4 words but in a different order:

“religion, magic, science and technology.”¹

BACKGROUND:

Let's come back to that exercise but first some background.

A few years back, I was sitting at a table for an Adult Education class, surrounded by church parishioners. When it came time for us to discuss the topic of the day, it became clear that everyone at the table had, as their vocation, something in the sciences, or in the *applied* sciences, realm.

Sitting there as a priest, a former history teacher who only made it through freshman undergraduate Biology, I was now discussing Scripture and theology with “wisemen” and “wise-women” from different occupational fields and different ways of perceiving the world.

¹ Peter Kreeft, “Lost in the Cosmos.” http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/13_lost-in-the-cosmos/peter-kreeft_lost-in-the-cosmos_.mp3

It was a fascinating, and maybe even a bit intimidating, experience and so I tread a little bit lightly on this subject, the relationship between “religion” and “science” (and indeed “magic” and “technology”).

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany, one of the major feasts in our church calendar, where we celebrate the unveiling, the discovery, the manifestation of Christ’s Incarnation to all the world.

It reminds me of the ancient Greek scientist Archimedes who, the story goes, had a scientific *epiphany* when he got into the bathtub and noticed the volume displacement of water caused by the absence his body. Archimedes is said to have immediately jumped out and ran through the streets *naked* shouting “Eureka” “Eureka” (literally “I have found it”) rejoicing in his discovery.

Thus, we might call today the “Feast of ‘Eureka.’”

GOSPEL:

That would keep the festival of Epiphany at its scientific roots. According to our Gospel, the first people that experienced the Epiphany (Capital “E”), the first people that came and worshipped Jesus, were “wisemen from the East.”

The wisemen were, literally, *magi*— where our word “magicians” come from—so they were probably some combination of astrologers and astronomers, fortune tellers and learned scholars.² They were “scientists” in some sense, although that word would have been an anachronism to that day.

Regardless, they saw this star, a sign in the natural world, they collected this new data, they made a hypothesis, they tested its validity by following it, until it all came to fruition in the scene in Bethlehem.

Matthew’s intention in recording this event with the magi as its heroes seems to be to call attention to the fact that the religious leaders, with Scripture as the guide, were not able to interpret or understand the sign correctly, rather they conspire with Herod in *opposition* to the sign.³ The wisemen, gentiles and foreigners, however, *were* able to correctly predict and find its source.

Score ‘one point’ for the science geeks, ‘zero’ for the religious nerds!

² Brown, Raymond E. 2008. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*. (Updated Edition.) New York: Doubleday, 167.

³ J.D. Kingsburg, “The Developing Conflict between Jesus and the Jewish Leaders in Matthew’s Gospel: A Literary-Critical Study” in Stanton Graham N., 1995. *The Interpretation of Matthew* (2nd ed.) Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 187.

GROUPINGS:

Let's go back to our four words: "Religion and magic, science and technology."

Most would put the first two together and then the last two. There is a point to that, because science and technology involve the scientific method and empirical data.

But what if we were instead to put "religion" and "science" together?

Both of these involve how to conform the mind to objective truth in the world. That is, religion attempts to conform our mind to the nature of God, while science attempts to conform our minds to the nature of the world.

The second two, meanwhile, involve trying to conform reality to the human will. Magic and Technology involve a Promethean desire to control our world. The only difference is that one works, and one does not.⁴

Here is how C.S. Lewis describes all this in *The Abolition of Man*: "There is something which unites magic and (technology) while separating both from the wisdom of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. But for magic and (technology) the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique."⁵

Now, I drove here in a car, wrote this sermon on a computer, took antibiotics to rid myself (almost) of my bronchial infection, for those watching us online—we are the mercy of fiberoptic cable. That's all well and good.

We get in trouble when we worship the technology, the technique, that brought us those things.

The wisemen came away from their encounter with the Christ Child worshipping this baby, they did not worship their stargazing capabilities, or themselves.

Likewise, we should be careful not to worship whatever technique is being packaged as a new god that we need to give our time, effort, and energy to.

As a teacher, I was relentlessly bombarded with new educational methods to pay homage to. Smart boards, online learning, you name it.

As a parent, it's Baby Einstein, or whatever fad of the week.

Again, all those things are well and good.

⁴ Kreeft, "Lost in the Cosmos." http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/13_lost-in-the-cosmos/peter-kreeft_lost-in-the-cosmos_.mp3.

⁵ C.S. Lewis. 1943. *The Abolition of Man*. Quebec: Samizdat, 38. <http://www.samizdat.qc.ca/cosmos/philo/AbolitionofMan.pdf>

But they are methods, they are means to an end.

But they don't have anything to do with wisdom.

This sermon might be a little overdue and overdone, as a culture we are slowly catching up to the difference and the limits to technology.

As recently as 2010, many believed that technology could solve all of our problems.

Remember: Steve Jobs was a Saint, and Mark Zuckerberg should run for president?

Then, by 2020, many people were calling the preceding decade: "The Terrible Tens" and there was a new reckoning.

Here is a sampling of article titles from then:

from the *New York Times*: "The 2010s: The Decade where Tech Lost its Way"

from the *Washington Post*: "The Top Ten Technologies of the Decade. They weren't all bad."⁶

All this bubbles up as we celebrate, along with the Feast of Epiphany, a new year and we encounter, in each passing year, startling new technologies.

Artificial Intelligence, "AI" is the one that has gotten the most publicity recently and no small amount of criticism.

SHIFT:

One way to look at the Epiphany story is to see it as an example of science and religion—reason and faith—working together. It's only with both observing natural phenomenon and with the witness of Scripture that this Epiphany occurs.

That symbiotic relationship offers an example of a working partnership where the two work together, where science and religion combine to get the Wise Men to Bethlehem.

That symbiotic relationship is a helpful counterexample for us who live in a world where science and religion are all too often put in conflict with one another, with two sides staring at each other with suspicion and disregard.

(This is sermon for another time but it's important for us to remember that the so-called "conflict" between the two is a decidedly modern understanding of the way that religion and science interrelate.

⁶ "The Decade that Tech Lost its Way." *New York Times*. (December 15, 2019)

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/15/technology/decade-in-tech.html>; Geoffrey A. Fowler, "We picked the 10 most-influential technologies of the decade. It isn't all bad." *Washington Post* (December 26, 2019)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/12/26/we-picked-most-influential-technologies-decade-it-isnt-all-bad/>.

Only in the last few centuries, after the Enlightenment and the Scientific revolution were perceived as threats to Biblical certainty and Church authority, have science and religion been placed in opposing camps.)

CONCLUSION:

The solution, of course, to heal this rift is discernment, judgement, ethics, and... most of all... wisdom.

We need the wisemen and wise women now more than ever.

Wise scientists like the *magi* who “were wise enough to go beyond reason and fellow the intuitive tug of their wondering hearts.... Trusting the journey even though they did not know where they are going”⁷

Wise people of faith like the *magi* “who have a wondering, wandering kind of wisdom... that seeks delight and doctrine, relationship and rationality. Willing to take risks and explore the unknown to find the Holy.”⁸

Folks who have the “intellectual curiosity and spiritual hunger... to leave behind all that is familiar” trusting that God can lead them into this brave new world, this great light.⁹

In doing so they are rewarded with a discovery, this Eureka, this Epiphany of earth-shattering significance, one that changes not only the route upon which they returned, but the whole world around them. **AMEN.**

⁷ Susan Andrews. 2013. “Pastoral Perspective” in *Feasting on the Gospels- Matthew* (Vol. 1) Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 16.

⁸ Andrews, 16.

⁹ Andrews, 16.