

Epiphany  
The United Church of Broomfield  
January 9, 2022

Matthew 2:1-12 (MSG)

<sup>1-2</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod’s kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We’re on pilgrimage to worship him.”

<sup>3-4</sup> When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

<sup>5-6</sup> They told him, “Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

It’s you, Bethlehem, in Judah’s land,  
no longer bringing up the rear.  
From you will come the leader  
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.”

<sup>7-8</sup> Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.”

<sup>9-10</sup> Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

<sup>11</sup> They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

<sup>12</sup> In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

Isaiah 60:1-6 (CEB)

Arise! Shine! Your light has come;  
the Lord’s glory has shone upon you.  
**2** Though darkness covers the earth  
and gloom the nations,  
the Lord will shine upon you;  
God’s glory will appear over you.  
**3** Nations will come to your light  
and kings to your dawning radiance.  
**4** Lift up your eyes and look all around:  
they are all gathered; they have come to you.

Your sons will come from far away,  
and your daughters on caregivers' hips.

5 Then you will see and be radiant;  
your heart will tremble and open wide,  
because the sea's abundance will be turned over to you;  
the nations' wealth will come to you.

6 Countless camels will cover your land,  
young camels from Midian and Ephah.

They will all come from Sheba,  
carrying gold and incense,  
proclaiming the Lord's praises.

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The Twelve Days of Christmas ended on January 5<sup>th</sup> and then came Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Epiphany is always on January 6<sup>th</sup> and so we are celebrating it today. The word "Epiphany" refers to something "made manifest" or "revealed." When you come up with a brilliant idea, you might say that you've had an "epiphany." It makes me wonder why in those moments the clichéd response is to say, "Eureka," instead of "Epiphany!"

On Epiphany, the church celebrates the manifestation of God as human - the ways that Jesus "reveals" God to us. That's the main "epiphany" associated with the observance is the magi visiting the new born baby Jesus. This day is celebrated in different ways around the world. In Latin America, the day is called "Día de los Reyes" or "Kings' Day." In many countries, for a long time, Epiphany was considered more important than Christmas and considered the 2<sup>nd</sup> most celebrated day in the religious calendar following Easter. Epiphany is a much bigger deal in many countries than here in the United States. In fact, in some countries, you get gifts on Epiphany instead of on Christmas! Children are told to leave hay for the three kings' camels — or horses, in some traditions — and the kings will leave three presents for them — the same number of gifts Jesus got.

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We might not party as hard on Epiphany as some do in other places, but it is good for us to look at the story of the magi and think about what it might mean for us.

The story has so many factors that are disputed, argued, and doubted. Was there really a star? Did this all happen in December? Were there really only three wise men? And, were they actually men and not women? What exactly is a magus (may-gus)? If magus/magi translates to magic/sorcerer, why do some people call them kings? If they were kings, of what areas or regions were they kings? It's said they were from the East - where exactly in the East? Are there answers to all of these questions? Yes...and no. As with many parts of the Bible, there are some questions that are unanswerable and will remain that way. And...while we may not know precise and exact information, through scholarly research we have answers that are narrower and closer than in times gone by. Some things we can say for certain ... even though debate still continues. So here's what we know...

First, this story makes it clear that Jesus began his mission of reconciling the world to God at the very start. The magi were almost certainly from Persia, probably around what is now Iran. Some research says they were priests of the Zoroastrian faith and as part of their roles, they were astrologers who studied the stars, looking for anything new. When they saw the new star appear in the West, they began to travel toward it.

Based on the scriptures, we assume that they must have had access to the prophecies of ancient Israel because they seemed to know that Israel was expecting the birth of their Messiah. When they reached Herod's palace, mistakenly assuming that *everyone* would be looking forward to the child's birth, they asked Herod, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Didn't they think that Herod might feel a little threatened by the thought of a new king? It's not like there would be co-Kings, so if the prophecies and magi were correct, Herod would be out of a job. Maybe the wise men weren't quite that wise after all, waltzing into Herod's palace and telling him that a new king had been born!

Herod was well known for being a brutal tyrant — he even killed his own wife and three of his sons because he feared an uprising. Now, Herod hears that the one prophesied in the Old Testament is close, and he responds with murderous paranoia. He does desperate and barbaric things to keep his position. Following today's reading in verses 16-17 of Matthew, it tells us that Herod had every baby boy in Bethlehem under the age of two killed.

As the current king of *Israel*, Herod should have been pleased that the Messiah might have come, but he doesn't even know where the Messiah is supposed to be born and had to consult his chief priests to get all the details. This raises the question of why weren't the chief priests and scribes out looking for the Messiah? If the magi knew, shouldn't the king's scholars and chief priests? Why wasn't *anyone* looking for the messiah? What was wrong with the religious leaders who should have known better than anyone about all of this? You'd think they would at least have gone rushing *along with* the magi to find the newborn king and worship him. But only the magi were, alas, wise *enough* to follow the star. And when they reached Bethlehem, they rejoiced upon finding the child Jesus.

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We humans are a stubborn lot. We can only surmise that the religious leaders let their fear or pride keep them from doing the right thing. As **religious leaders**, wouldn't the right thing have been to know religious prophecies, monitor them closely and do what would have been best for the people of God? God had great things planned for the people, but the chief priests wouldn't give up their control and allow God to work. As adults we too often lose the child-like ability to dream big and not only allow the unthinkable but embrace it. People thought they knew better and they missed everything. Then and now, we forget about the cosmic wonders and mysteries of Jesus' birth, life and ministry.

Listen to this poem by Walt Whitman, called ***When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer***

*When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,  
When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,  
How soon unaccountable I became - tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*

Thankfully for us, God's plans go forward even without our understanding or cooperation. The whole Bible is the story of God doing things for us, even if we're being dragged along kicking and screaming. The ones who fare best in the Bible are the ones who stop going against the tide of God's action and, instead, roll with it. The ones who rise and wander into the mystical night-air to look up in perfect silence at the stars.

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And so here we are at the start of a new year. Maybe resolutions aren't so great, but we should constantly strive to better ourselves, so here's a challenge for all of us to consider. The magi were constantly gazing toward the heavens, waiting for a new star to appear. Think about that — how many stars are there? And you're going to catch a new one popping up? When Jesus' star appeared, however, they were able to spot it and follow it.

That's the first part: Watch for epiphanies. Some are little, like the star. Some are huge, like Jesus appearing on earth! Both were manifestations of God, and both were possible to miss. Epiphanies are happening all around us. Maybe you've had one. Some people don't think that God sends us signs and some people think such "signs" are simply coincidences.

- A woman was buying a car and prayed for God to show her which car to buy. As she was going through the dealership, she saw one with a butterfly sticker. She loved butterflies, so she bought that car. Was that a sign from God or a coincidence?
- There was a preacher who was pastor at a huge church and one day was particularly hectic. While crossing from one side of the sanctuary to the other, he glanced out of the double glass doors of the church and saw, perfectly framed in the glass, a tree budding with purple blossoms. It captivated him for a moment and reminded him of God's presence. Sign or coincidence?

These examples are kind of mundane, but scripture has examples of God acting in situations that seem like no big deal to others but that were a big deal for the ones for whom God acted. You may have had such an experience; I believe that I have. So, train yourself to look for God moments — little epiphanies. Think of how your life will change when you begin looking for and recognizing God's activity all around you.

Sometimes epiphanies require more from us than to simply notice them. They might be a call to action. Moses experienced this with the burning bush. It was a fantastic manifestation of God's presence, but in that moment, God called Moses to liberate God's people from Egypt. The star the wise men saw was not just a pretty thing but a call to action — to go out and find the newborn king.

That's the second challenge: If you get into the habit of looking for epiphanies or manifestations of God's presence in your life, be prepared to act if one of them turns out to be a call from God to go somewhere or do something. It doesn't have to be something grand. Have we come upon someone who looked like they needed someone to talk to or who seemed to be having a really bad day, but we didn't say anything? Then we regret it later. Sometimes it's hard to recognize the moment of God's appearing when it arrives. But the amazing thing is that when we start paying attention and noticing God's presence around us, and when we start following-through when we feel that nudge of the Holy Spirit to act, we become nothing less than living epiphanies for other people.

The world is full of epiphanies — it could be a new star in the heavens or the birth of a child. Let us commit this year to be attentive. And let us commit this year to act when called upon. Ultimately, that is how the kingdom of God breaks into this world — little moment by little moment. Let us never allow those moments to pass us by.

Amen