

## *The Epiphany of Our Lord*

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

**MATTHEW 2:1-12**

*Epiphany Lutheran Church · Richmond, VA*

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Several years ago right after Christmas I found some of those automatic timers that can be hooked onto lamps. We have a couple of dark, but well-travelled corners in our house where it is helpful to have some light for navigating, but leaving the lamps on all the time runs up the electricity bill. I fixed the timers on a few of those lamps and tried to arrange it so they'd come on during the night and go off when it was daytime. It didn't take my wife, Melinda, and me too long to realize that those timers needlessly complicate things—at least the el-cheapo versions I had bought do. Melinda started to remark that the light is never on when she needs it and then when she tries to turn it on herself it won't click on because the timer is in control. One night she was making her way up the stairs with our infant in her arms and the light right in front of her went out, inexplicably, leaving her in the dark. Exasperated, she hollered out, "Honey, your light just went out again." Maybe I'm just no good with technology, but we ended up deciding that it's still just easier to reach down and turn the lights on or off when you need them.

The magi—or the wise men, as our gospel text translates the word today—are drawn to the child Jesus by a strange light that turns on and off, inexplicably, in the sky above them. They don't have control of it. Rather, it has control of them. It mystifies them, beginning somewhere in the East, in their country (or countries) of origin, luring them like the tornadoes lure the storm-trackers on the Weather Channel.

This strange starlight brings them from miles away, but they are mysterious figures, in and of themselves. We have come to call them wise men, or magi, or kings, but it's unclear exactly who they are or who, if anyone, they represent. Most likely they were something akin to astrologers from the area of modern-day Iraq or Saudi Arabia, but even that is not certain. We have also long numbered them as three, just like that beloved Christmas carol does, but that's only because three gifts are mentioned in the story. This could have been an entire entourage of star-trackers in a big middle eastern caravan.

Regardless of who these magi really are, their mysteriousness is part of the point. The mystique that surrounds their identity, even to this day and age, is exactly why Matthew wanted to make sure we knew this story. The point is that a group of total foreigners see an extraordinary star shining in the sky and are drawn to the place where it shuts off. After a brief detour to King Herod, during which all of Jerusalem gets worked into a tizzy, the wise men find the child Jesus and pay him homage with their gifts. Perhaps, as Martin Luther once suggested, the wise men went first to Jerusalem because it was the capital city, and where else would a king be born but near a royal palace? In this case, the royal city happens to be Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, which they discover after Herod's own team of scholars finds this relatively obscure passage from the prophet Micah. Once they start for Bethlehem, the star automatically clicks on again, and the wise men are filled with great joy. "Why did the star not take the wise men straight to Bethlehem without any necessity of consulting Scriptures?" Martin Luther asked. "Because God wanted to teach us that we should follow the Scriptures and not our own murky ideas."<sup>1</sup>

Be that as it may, Matthew makes it clear from the very beginning of his gospel message that all people will be drawn to this light. Even though Matthew firmly places Jesus within the

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "Herod," in Martin Luther's Christmas Book, ed. by Roland H. Bainton. P52

lineage of Israel, tracing his pedigree all the way back to Abraham, the first people to pay Jesus homage and recognize his royalty are not even Jesus' own people. All people may claim Christ as their king. It doesn't matter how mysterious or exotic or plain or ordinary your background is.

What has drawn you to Jesus? What leads you to seek his company and the company of fellow seekers? Whether or not you are able to claim he has some authority in your life, what continues to bring you to worship on a regular basis? When we reflect on the wise men's trek from afar, we realize that each of us has our own journey across life's desert to come face to face with the Lord. What has been the star for you? What is that light in the dark hallway that helps you make your way? It may be Holy Scripture. It may be the words and presence of a particular person who shared God's love. Or it may be the life of forgiveness and selfless care as it's embodied by the community of believers.

One may say that a church needs to be many things. It needs, for example, to be a center of worship and community service. It needs to be a place where children and adults can learn more about Scripture and their faith tradition and how to forgive and love others. It needs to be a voice for justice and compassion in the world at large. Above all, the church needs to be a place where all people are continually drawn in communion with Jesus Christ so they may pay homage to him. The congregation I serve happens to be named Epiphany Lutheran Church, but no matter a congregation's formal name, it always needs to be aware of its epiphany duty: that is, the church needs to humbly keep in mind that we are still, at our core, a stable way-station meant for receiving gifts for God from total strangers.

No congregation ever really exists for the sake of the people who have already joined, for the sake of the people whose ancestors are on the charter or who have been on the roll for generations. Any congregation's existence, no matter how strong or weak their programs may be, is based on meeting those who've not yet come to faith or who are lingering on the fringes of it, those interactions that the Holy Spirit enables. The church exists to draw in those who are seeking, to be a first taste of the communion of saints for those who realize that they're sinners, (of which I count myself one). Imagine the kind of God who gathers all of his people together not simply for their own sake, but for the sake of the world that his Son may be known! That's the God those magi were seeking.

There is some anxiety within individual congregations and in denominations as a whole about declines in membership and activity and influence, especially as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Some church leaders have noted that this anxiety and sense of urgency can lead congregations to take too many measures of self-preservation—for example, prioritizing certain ministries or developing certain habits that keep members happy or comfortable over ones that reach out to newcomers and welcome them in. To be quite honest, I think any congregation can fall into this trap at just about any time, and, to complicate matters, it's not always so clear-cut which ministries and programs are all about self-preservation and which ones really grow out of pure intentions to spread the word about Christ.

Whatever the scenario, one former Episcopal pastor, Barbara Brown Taylor, has wisely observed that “at least one reason for the urgency,” even when it ends up being about self-preservation, is because people know that “the church is the place of divine transformation. It is the place where people say yes both to God and to one another. The church is where Christ turns our water into wine.”<sup>2</sup> I would add: the church is where strangers from afar are made brothers and sisters of the one true King. After all, the wise men did go home by another way. They were transformed by what they encountered in that first epiphany way-station.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The poured-out church,” in *Christian Century*. May 29, 2009

Remembering our epiphany duty and enabling these holy encounters is a mighty task for any congregation, and we can sense urgency in everything we do, but when we let it be Jesus who shines—not some nifty little gizmo or gadget ministry or some murky idea of our own—the light will not go out.

When all of us help each of us remember that it is chiefly Jesus who is being offered here for the sake of the community, for the sake of the world, then we will never really have to worry about our survival, and we will never have to be ashamed of what he calls us to do.

When we take to heart that every little interaction that each of us has, that every little word we say to each other can be a holy reflection of the gift in Jesus—or it can be like Herod’s scheming and turning people away—then we are taking seriously our task as church.

When we realize this congregation, like all the others, exists primarily for the sake of those who are still making their way through the wilderness, then, as the writer of Ephesians says, the “wisdom of God in its rich variety will be made known through us” to the entire universe.

And when we think that the little light of grace and glory goes blinking and fluttering inexplicably from time to time, it is not because Christ has left the building, or because we need to shout out, “Honey, your light has gone off again!” More often than not things have gone dark because we’ve taken our eyes off that Brightest and Best of the stars of the morning.

For he is the Star who never takes his eyes off of us, no matter what we do or how far we wander. He has been sent to save and restore, to make the world whole again. He is the King of all kings, the one who dies that all may live...and receive treasure, the treasures of mercy and forgiveness and life forevermore.

Amen.

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