

## **“epiphanies”**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

**January 7, 2018**

### **Scholars from the East**

*2<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.”*

*3-4 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?”*

*5-6 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.”*

*7-8 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.”*

*9-10 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.*

As I was sitting at my writing desk this past Thursday contemplating today's sermon, I was listening to some background music. The Indigo Girls were singing one of my all-time favorite songs of theirs. The song is called "Galileo," and it's about how time pays it forward generation after generation. The lyrics by Emily and Amy ask, "How long 'til my soul gets it right? Does any human being ever reach that kind of light?" It's a great song—I'll have Julie sing it for you sometime when we are not on a higher church Sunday like this one.

It occurs to me that pretty much the whole past year we have been observers in the stands watching the Jesus Parade go by. We have studied what Jesus did and what Jesus said. We have explored what his disciples thought of him and how they reacted to his insistent call on their lives. We have witnessed in angst the unbridled malice towards Jesus exhibited by the Pharisees.

Jesus has been on the royal float down the middle of our parade route. We see the disciples running around the float car waving banners and pleasing the crowd. We see the Pharisees up on the

parade stand, arms crossed, looking down upon the spectacle with disapproving eyes and cast-iron hearts.

We, the crowd, have been waving our Jesus flags. We have been sitting in comfortable folding chairs sipping our cool, refreshing drinks, eating hotdogs end to end, taking it all in. For a large part of our church year, maybe for almost all of it, we are spectators, watching the Jesus story play out in front of us, just as it has year after year. We have been satisfied to watch.

Soon, in just 4  $\frac{1}{2}$  more weeks, we will experience again the end of religious and governmental tolerance for our Jesus Parade. Right before our eyes, we will see the Pharisees arguing with each other about what they are seeing and about how to silence the upstart preacher from Galilee. We will hear them curse the name of Jesus, and we will hear them conspire with the Romans against him.

Not long after we are privy to this spectacle, we will see our Lord harassed, arrested, tortured, tried for made-up crimes, and crucified. We will watch this again from the stands. We will come out to again watch the parade and instead, we will be faced with a kangaroo court and an unjustified condemnation. No more cool drinks and hotdogs—it will be serious business, and we will watch it with teary eyes and mournful hearts. And then, just as fast, it will be Easter! And all will be well again for another year.

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Observers to the great cosmos Christian story, observers and witnesses are what we are. Someone dear to my heart confessed to me the other day that of late she had been "living in the land of artificial harmony." What a profound statement! I told her it would show up in my sermon, because that is what this in-between time between Christmas and Lent is all about.

Jesus and his followers at this point in the narrative are, indeed, living in the land of artificial harmony. Jesus is converting persons each day to his way of thinking, to his way of being with God. He is literally saving lives with his healing, relationship-building, compassion and justice theology, with the freedom in God he is offering those lucky enough to hear him or hear of him. He is healing people and chasing away their fears -their demons -all that would keep the people from a life walking with God-who-loves-them.

The Pharisees at first think him amusing. They joke with him; they toy with him. They try to trip him up on complicated theological issues about having successive spouses and working on the Sabbath and the prominence of religious law over heart practice. They call him a madman. They claim he has been drinking just a tad too much of the communion wine. They wave him off as a crackpot, as a charlatan, as a bit of a religious freak.

They think him amusing until they don't.

When Jesus starts gathering a following and the Pharisees begin to feel threatened, then they get serious and they focus their efforts on a plot to get rid of him.

As this drama unfolds within Jewish circles, the atheistic Romans don't really care; to the minor officials living and ruling in Rome, one more preacher is just like all the others. Jesus poses no threat to the Roman Empire. How could he? He's skinny and he's poor; he has no pedigree, he has no money, and most of all, he has no army. They, too, find him amusing.

They think him amusing until they don't.

The Pharisees and the Romans and the Jesus freaks were all living in the land of artificial harmony-- until they weren't.

We watch and we wait, for we know what is coming, and we feel a bit smug because we know what happens after their story ends. We know Easter and we know renewal and hope. We know, as I said a couple of weeks ago, that Love wins in the end, even as the Roman Empire and the Pharisees die away.

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We are observers in this great cosmic drama year after year, but there is one day in our church calendar, one mostly forgotten day in Protestant tradition, where we are invited to awaken all our anesthetized senses, to climb down out of the parade stands, and join in the march. That day was yesterday, and as every year in our

tradition, it was largely forgotten, ignored, and uncelebrated. Today, I was guided by the Lectionary to preach about the baptism of Jesus, but I just couldn't stand to be a silent witness yet another Sunday. No, this Sunday, this Sunday I wanted to be an actor in the greatest story of our faith ever told.

Yesterday was Epiphany, the day in the liturgical calendar when we are invited by God to WAKE UP, to climb down the stairs from the spectator stands and to join in the Jesus parade. We are invited to WAKE UP and ask ourselves the hard questions of our lives—about our priorities, about our relationships, about our passions, perhaps even about our life's work. Our epiphany times are those in which we are confronted square on with the questions, "when will my soul get it right?" and "does anyone, and mostly me, ever reach the highest light?"

In Greek, the word for epiphany is *epiphaneia*, meaning a "manifestation or appearance." It is the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, the official end to the Christmas season, unless you live in the Denver Metro area, where everyone knows that Christmas ends only when the Denver Stock Show ends!

Epiphany is when the three wise men, the three scholars, are directed by the God-star to where the Christ child lies in the manger. That is the very odd, but very sacred story that we heard Karen tell us today. Only Matthew creates the story of the Magi; his predecessor, Mark, didn't write at all about the baby Jesus, and Luke is

all about Mary's journey into motherhood, shepherds, and angels. Luke has no mysterious wise men from other lands heaping gifts upon Jesus and his parents.

Epiphany is a Matthew creation. It is important to Matthew that his readers awaken to the presence of God from the minute Jesus enters the human story. It is his ministry passion that all people, Jews and non-Jews alike, join personally in the Jesus narrative with their own awakening, their own epiphany of faith.

As Dante described it in, *The Divine Comedy*, God "is the love that moved the stars." It was and is this Universal Love that compels the Magi to follow the sky's light and find the world's hope. It is this universal invitation that compels Matthew to invite us personally to join his gospel parade.

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No longer do we have to sit idly by as spectators. Matthew invites us all to our own Epiphany, to our own awakening in the Jesus Way. He was so distressed that the Gentiles of his day were streaming into the Christian faith while the vast majority of Jews simply did not believe. This, of course, begs the question for us today, "Do we ever hold the truth right before us and miss the living God? Will our souls ever get it right? Will we ever reach the highest light?"

Matthew's story of the three wise men tells us definitively that God is determined to be found; Jesus will use any means available to compel all who are open to participate in his enduring story, message and promise. That the Magi took another road home out and away from the manger scene might also tell us that once you have traveled on the road to Jesus, once you have been graced by the Christ-child, your life will never be the same.

This is our own experience, isn't it? Once we have set about on the road, once we have left the spectator stands of life, once we have asked in earnest, "Just when will our souls get it right?" then we are the same no more. Once we have seen the work of God-in-Jesus in our lives, then we are Christian. We have become a new thing; we are changed. We are transformed. We have experienced our Epiphany.

God is the love that has moved heaven and earth for us. God is the love that has moved the stars so that we may find a new life with Christ.

We find the Christ child on Epiphany. We find the Christ-child, and we are then compelled to walk a strange and unfamiliar road henceforth. Our personal epiphany—our own faith journey—may bring great insights to us. I have a friend who has left her line of ministry for another just this past month, and she told me her decision was borne out of a time of discernment in which the voice of epiphany was as clear as a bell to her.



I have another friend who just walked away from a very lucrative partnership after ten years working her fingers and heart to the bone. At dinner the other night, she was talking about finding another similar employment position when all of a sudden, a light came over her face and she questioned aloud. "What if I don't want to come back to this work anymore? What if I am supposed to do something else?" It was her epiphany moment.

Still another person I know has had a medical crisis such that she is at an epiphany-crossroads. She has yet to hear the call of Dante's God star of love, but those around her can see that it is a great shift time for her, an intense time where change—another road—is the only way to go from here.

People all across this country are alive with their own epiphanies. They are questioning their time-honored political beliefs, their American values, and their means of political expression. We see and hear it all the time—the angst that comes with change, the anger that comes with dispute, the fear that comes with misunderstanding, and the violence that shakes us all to the core.

We all had an epiphany moment this past week when, with tears in our eyes, we watched the funeral procession for Deputy Zak Parrish. We stopped. We paid attention. We were made aware. We stopped and we paid attention and we recognized the value of a single human life. We thanked openly, or privately in our hearts, those who

work every day to preserve and protect the sanctity of human life. For some, I suspect, young Deputy Parrish's senseless death at the hands of a tormented soul in possession of an assault rifle may bring an epiphany in the debate over gun controls.

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I invite you this Epiphany Sunday to look up. Look up and find's God's star waiting to direct you to the Christ child. Start your epiphany journey by traveling this directed road, and when you get to the place where you find your own Jesus, stop there, take time there, be aware there, be awakened there. And when you and God are ready, travel out from there into the world on a different path. Leave behind your living in the land of artificial harmony, trading in that life and land for one of authenticity, joy, and purpose. I invite you to live in the light of God's Spirit of action. Come down from the spectator stands and join the world in a new way where you are convinced that, indeed, your soul has gotten it right, that you are reaching for the higher light.

Happy Epiphany, my brothers and my sisters. God is merely less than a breath away, inviting-nay, imploring you to come down out of the spectator stands and join the Parade.

*May It Be So.*