

Pastor's Message - Epiphany (2023)
Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12

Stars and wise men are popular decorations for Christmas time; I have a lighted star on the front of my house and a wise men garden flag in the lawn. Epiphany is not an often-used word in secular culture, but perhaps you know Epiphany through the familiar silhouetted-image of Three Wise Men bearing gifts as they followed the Great Star by night. In some cultures, Epiphany is known as the Day of the Kings (Dia de los Reyes). It is also known as Twelfth Day or Twelfth Night, reflecting an old custom of giving a gift for each of the days from December 25 to January 6 for the 12 days of Christmas. The day has special meaning for a number of reasons. Several branches of Christianity celebrate the birth of the Jesus on January 6 or January 7 instead of Christmas Day, December 25. But since today, the 8th, is close to the 6th or 7th, depending on how you count the twelve days of Christmas, today our worship focus is on Epiphany.

That word, *epiphany*, means *appearance* or *manifestation*. Popular usage likens *epiphany* to words such as *eureka* or *aha!* Use of this word by some English speakers conjures images of having a light bulb turned on, or of being able to see something that was once hidden from view.

Rather than being an afterthought or getting lumped into Christmas, Epiphany Sunday is still part of the Christmas season, the climactic moment of the annual Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle. For even though the story of the Magi following the star to pay homage to the child Jesus may not, at first glance, seem like the first moment in which we meet Jesus as the Messiah, that's exactly what it is. Why? Because the revelation in this holy season is **not** the birth of Jesus. It is the confirmation of his true identity. We can't forget that the Magi certainly weren't Christians, no such thing yet, they weren't even Jews, but came from a completely different religious system. They are the reason why Gentiles, non-Jews, were introduced to Jesus.

The way this story is often popularly told, the Magi see the star in the sky, and then use it to navigate first to Jerusalem and then to the home where Jesus lay. The star is often pictured as moving about in the sky (a rather "un-star-like" behavior) like a GPS indicator, and the Magi are pictured as following the star where it leads. Even in our song, "We Three Kings," the chorus has us sing, "following yonder star."

We know this isn't how stars behave, at all. It's not even how planets (the word planet literally means "wanderer") behave. So did the writers of the New Testament, and so did Zoroastrian astrologers, for that's who they may have been, at the time.

It may be helpful, rather than continuing to tell this story as if the star were like a GPS indicator, and so making the whole thing seem foolish to modern (or even ancient) ears, to pay closer attention to what the Bible actually says and how that dovetails with ancient astrological understandings, and even with modern science.

What the Bible portrays is that a star signaling the birth of a king in Judea according to then-current astrological understandings had appeared in the sky. They knew this star signaled the birth of a king, and not just any king, but specifically the king of the Jews. Why else would they have come to Judea and specifically Jerusalem?

The magi followed the star at this point only in the sense that the star indicated Judea as the location of the birth. They crossed the Arabian desert from somewhere in the East (Baghdad or Tehran?) and went to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, considering it as the most likely place either to find him or to learn more. Indeed, when they report why and how they've come to Jerusalem,

they say nothing of “following the star” at all. They tell Herod and others only that they had seen “his star as it rose” (Matthew 2:3) and headed to Jerusalem. They did learn more in Jerusalem, not from the star, but from scribes who related the prophecy of the birth of a messiah (a new David) in Bethlehem (David’s hometown).

Herod, not the star, sent them to Bethlehem. The Greek in Matthew 2:9 could be translated either “the star went ahead of them” or “the star led them.” In the first case, the language is most likely astrological. The star was moving relative to the other constellations as they made their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. In the second case, it means they were still tracking the same star as some sort of point of reference for *meaning*, if not precise location.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, they started looking for the child. On one of those evenings, they observed the star “stopped over the place where the child was” (2:9). The key phrase here is “where the child was.”

This curious phrase likely doesn’t mean the star was seen directly above any one particular house as opposed to any other house in the small town of Bethlehem. The distances are too great for that precise a reckoning of location from the constellations in the sky to a particular point on earth. And they would have known that.

The far more likely meaning, given that they were astrologers, would have to do with the relative position of the star they had been tracking with respect to the “houses” named in their astrology. So, the star they were tracking was, at a particular point, positioned above “where the child was,” i.e. above the “house of the child,” or Scorpio, as we may call that constellation.

The second meaning points to them seeing the star *in this position* when they arrived where Jesus was. That they were filled with joy to see the star (verse 10) probably indicates the star did not simply “stop” (i.e., stop shining, though that is also a possible translation). The position of the star relative to the constellations when they arrived at the home of Jesus indicated to the magi that what the star and its location were pointing to (a newborn King of Judea) was now directly before them in the physical house they had come to. There, they offered their gifts and their homage to Jesus. The star was a sign for them.

There are signs everywhere. Everywhere we go we see signs. Road signs are probably some of the most important, giving us instructions, warnings, and information. They are so important that we have to know them by their shape. An eight-sided sign is stop; three-sided is yield; round is a railroad sign. We also know them by their color. Red is a stop sign. Yellow is a warning of some kind, and blue with red at the top are interstate markers. In order to get our driver’s license we have to be able to identify the road signs. Then as we drive, we can interpret these signs and have the information we need.

The wise men from the east, who came to Jerusalem, said they saw the star which was a sign of the birth of the king of the Jews. We don't have the star as a sign today, pointing to Christ, but we can see other signs of his presence if we are alert. We can see lives changed from sorrow to joy through the hope that faith offers. We can see service done in the name of Christ. We can see new life through the forgiveness of sin. These are some of our signs that point to Christ our Lord.

In your faith journey, there have probably been times when you have really wanted some sign from God to give clarity and reassurance in some situation or some decision you had to make. Sometimes we may be focused on things of minor importance; sometimes we might be seeking guidance about a major decision in life, wondering which way to go.

In some moments, we may long for a sign that God really does care for us. In all of these times, we ask and then look for some kind of response. And often, we can miss the little signs because we're looking for a sign the size of a billboard. We rarely get the billboards. Rather, if we're paying attention, we experience a subtle change of perception, or say of seeing the world changes, and in time answers appear that make sense to us.

Matthew says that the Magi noticed a new star in the sky – one among the billions and billions out there – a star that wouldn't have been noticed at all unless they were looking for it. If they hadn't been following stars and searching for the Christ child, they might have missed him altogether. But they found him, for two reasons: 1. They were looking, and 2. There was someone to be found.

This is true of all sorts of signs. I can see road signs a long way off when I'm looking for them. I can spot them because they're important to help me get where I'm going. The same kind of awareness can be applied to our spiritual lives if we are willing to work at it. Signs demand our participation. It takes our eyes and our ears to notice the signs. When driving a car, for example, our eyes are simply not enough. We must depend on our ears to guide us as well. Screeching sirens, gonging railroad bells, squealing tires, honking horns, all warn us to take heed. They demand our attention. But if the conversation in the car, the music on the radio, or our own loud thoughts have deafened us to these important, life-saving "driving noises," our lives may be in danger. We may be singing along with our favorite song and suddenly hear and feel the crunch of metal against metal -- only because we didn't hear the tires squealing beside us on the highway. Or it can even happen backing into the garage or at low speeds in a parking lot.

As we look for and listen for the signs of God's activity in our lives, we may also build up our relationship with God. Of course, spiritual awareness also has its costs – there is no cheap grace. In our search for God, we have to be looking and listening, for there is someone to be found. Not with billboards suddenly appearing, but only with glimpses and whispers which cause us to wonder and to see things with new eyes. Pay attention to the dream, the voice of intuition that says God is at work once more.

We have the gift of this church to help us, but we need to be active and take advantage of that gift. We'll see and hear better. It's a new year. Time to get back to the Word.

We need the encouragement and support of a community of faith. It's a new year. Time to get back to the church. We'll see and hear better.

Worship will help to feed our souls so that the eyes of faith will remain healthy. It's a new year. Time to get back to worship. We'll see and hear better.

We need to get outside of ourselves to minister to others. Removing the focus from ourselves to others will make the eyes of faith much stronger. It's a new year. It's time to get back to service. We'll see and hear better.

We need to apply compassion and charity to those around us. Love is the ointment that heals the eyes of faith. Indeed, love, as Paul implies in 1 Corinthians 13, opens the eyes of faith and hope. It's a new year. Time to get back to love. We'll see and hear better.

Do you think that a congregation like ours just happens by chance? Are we a random gathering of folks from a certain place who share a common taste in religion? God has called and chosen each one of us with great care, so that together we may provide every gift needed for the building of our church, the serving of our community, the praising of our God.

Each one of you are God's gift to the world and to the church, and every gift is needed.

Just think how disappointed God is when your gifts or mine are not brought to the manger. Imagine how the church is weakened and diminished when some gifts are not shared. And see what rewards, what genuine pleasures, we forfeit when we withhold our gifts from God.

There is always joy when we give from the heart, especially when we give to God. There is joy for God. There is joy in the church. Have no doubt, the church is built up and sustained by your gifts. And there is joy for you and me, joy in the well-chosen gift, the well-fitted gift, the heart-felt gift, joy in every gift gladly given to God.

If you're in the habit of bringing your gifts to God, then you already know what I'm talking about. And if you're not in the habit, try it, and see for yourself.

There are signs all around us of God's presence. What kind of sign would it take in order for you to see in a new and different way, and to be moved to open your treasure chest, giving your best to God and walking in a new direction?

The Wise Men brought gifts. They did the thing that people in the East or in Africa or in India would do when visiting royalty. They brought gifts.

Gold was the kind of gift that you brought to a king.

Frankincense was the kind of gift that you would bring to a priest.

Myrrh was given to someone who was about to die.

On this Three Kings Day, otherwise known as Epiphany, think of the gift that you will offer to God in the coming year. The gift of time? The gift of your talents? Your service in the community? Your witness and testimony? The gift of undying love and devotion?

Their greatest gift comes to us in the form of a realization. The Wise Men were the first Gentiles to recognize that Jesus belongs to everyone. Good news is for everyone, not just a select few.

Star of wonder

Star of light

Star with royal beauty bright

Westward leading

Still proceeding

Guide us to thy perfect light.

The church celebrates Epiphany as the sudden realization of not just the wise men, but of all disciples of Christ in every age, that Jesus is Emanuel: God with us. In the early church (and in eastern churches today) the day of Epiphany marked the culmination of the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle and is a day for celebration, gift-giving, and most important, baptism into the Christian faith. This day, even more than Christmas, is the day-of-days for followers of Jesus Christ.

Our Bible passage today tells us that the Magi decided to go home by another route. Was it just the warning in a dream, or did they sense something else? People want to believe that there is another way. People want to believe that there is a better way and look and listen for signs to lead us in that direction. People want to believe it and want to attach our dreams to the prophet Isaiah's vision and let them wash over us like a great tide of hope. So let's do it. What better day than today to move confidently in the direction not only of our dreams, but also of God's?