

## Epiphanies Matthew 2:1-12

Preamble:

Happy New Year!

Congratulations, you made it to 2012. Does it seem like a relief? How many of you are glad that 2011 is over? How many are excited for 2012? How many of you are just plain tired?

This morning, instead of the usual “new year”-type sermon, I wanted to follow the Christian calendar, especially given the weeks we have already spent preparing for the advent of Christ. Christmas day can seem like a let-down, especially after a build-up of parties, gatherings, shopping, and eating. Our Christmas schedules can resemble a calendar looking like this [slide]. Daily filled with consumerism and busyness, with checklists of things to do. So often December 25<sup>th</sup> comes and goes, and I ask myself... that's it???

But then I studied this [liturgical calendar]

According to the Church calendar, in most traditions,

December 25<sup>th</sup> is the not end of The Twelve days of Christmas, but the beginning.

We are in the midst of Christmastide

this is the season of Christmas,

and it goes all the way to the Feast of the Epiphany.

In the Western Christian tradition, January 6<sup>th</sup> is Epiphany, which commemorates the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles through the visitation of the Magi. Somehow, we have condensed the nativity and the visitation of the Magi together, when in actuality they were separate events. By the time the Magi came along, Jesus, Mary and Joseph had a home in Bethlehem. Jesus was no longer a baby in a manger, but a child up to two years in age.

Today, I invite you on a journey. We're going to look at the meaning of Epiphany as told in the Gospel of Matthew and what it might mean for us today.

[Reading: Matthew 2:1-12]

## Main sermon

They saw a star.

They saw a bright star, a star with meaning,  
a star signifying that something profound has happened.

On some night, perhaps over a few nights,  
they perceived something different in the dark desert skies.

Perhaps it took them some time to decipher, to figure out what it meant.  
But they were finally able to read the message.

This star called out to them,  
beckoning them to come, to see, to behold something new.

And so they went.

We don't know how long they traveled, or even where they started.

It could have been a journey of weeks or of months.

Like the ancient Nabatean spice traders,

they probably rode camels and followed established trade routes through the Ancient Near East. The dangers would have been both foul and deadly.

Wild beasts were known on these trails, or bandits preying on isolated travellers.

We don't know what they left behind,

nor if they had any idea that their story would be remembered for thousands of years to come.

They were magi, also known as: wise-men, astrologers, magicians.

These were men who can interpret dreams, tell fortunes,  
or decipher starry messages from the gods.

We don't know their names (except by legend), their age, or even how many there were.

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The number "three" came from the number of gifts they bore,  
but they could have been as few as two or as many as twelve.

Kings? No, they were likely servants of kings.<sup>1</sup>

In the Persian Empire, they were the royal priestly assistants of great kings.<sup>2</sup>

In Jewish literature,

they were the sorcerers in Pharaoh's court in Exodus,

Balaam in Numbers 22-24,

and the magicians that King Nebuchadnezzar summoned in Daniel 2.<sup>3</sup>

In Matthew's gospel and only in Matthew's gospel, the visitation of the magi is mentioned. These magi were not only foreigners, but practitioners of controversial if not forbidden, arts. And the astonishing thing was that they came to worship the Messiah, the Christ child, the Anointed One of Israel. He is God in full humanity – Immanuel (Matt 1:23).

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<sup>1</sup> Powell, "The magi as kings," 463.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 464.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 466.

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Matt 2:2)

An epiphany is a divine disclosure to humanity.

In Greek, *epiphaneia* means to “to appear, manifest.”<sup>4</sup>

A revelation.. and in this case, it is the revelation by God to the Magi,  
of the Messiah, the king of the Jews, the saviour of the world.

The star was his sign and it signalled to them the Messiah's arrival.

They came to pay homage, meaning to worship, to adore, to pay respect and honour.

But King Herod and the rest of Jerusalem, were greatly disturbed.

The Messiah?

How could these foreigners know about the Messiah,  
and how could they interpret his arrival?

How could we not know about about this?

Are they right? What if they are?

What does a real Messiah mean for those in power?

What does a real Messiah mean for those under their power?

So when Herod checked with his chief priests and teachers of the law he discovered that the Scriptures was collaborating the Magi's story. The Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem - a ruler who will shepherd God's people.

This was not good news for Herod. He was king.

Herod the Great.

King of Judea from 37 BC to 4 BC.

At the time of the Magi's visit, Herod was near the end of his great and brutal reign.

He had his own wife, his mother-in-law, and his brother-in-law executed.<sup>5</sup>

To secure his seat on the throne, he murdered all the male heirs of a rival house.<sup>6</sup>

And having married 10 wives, Herod was constantly suspicious of his sons  
their attempts to seize the throne

and their rivalry with each other propelled Herod to re-write his will five times.<sup>7</sup>

Herod has two of his own sons killed, and another tried to poison him.<sup>8</sup>

Paranoid, ruthless, brute, murderer... are some of the descriptions that can be attributed to Herod the Great. With all this royal intrigue, and violent character, Herod's response to the Magi was not a surprise.

After the Magi failed to return to him,

Herod had all the male children in Bethlehem under the age of two killed.

In Herod's eyes, there could only be one King of Israel, and he was it.

The contrast between Herod and the Magi couldn't be greater.

<sup>4</sup> Patzia and Petrotta, *Pocket dictionary of biblical studies* Accordance Electronic ed. ver 1.1.

<sup>5</sup> Evans and Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament background* Accordance Electronic ed. ver 1.1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

The Magi came bearing gifts and to worship,  
 to literally bow down and pay homage to a child.  
 Heron conspired to kill  
 Moreover – the rest of Jerusalem reacted with fear  
 How could the revelation of God draw such different reactions?

Reading this story, I see that Jesus is not always good news to people.  
 He is good news to those who need Him,  
 The poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, the broken, the sick  
 He is good news to those who want to know him  
 the outsiders, the marginalized, the foreigners, the righteous and the compassionate  
 He is bad news to those who exclude and oppress others  
 the rulers, the religious authorities, the elite  
 All through Matthew's gospel we encounter a God who is for the powerless  
 and opposes the powerful.<sup>9</sup>  
 Jesus taught the Beatitudes where the poor, the meek, the hungry are blessed.  
 Jesus healed the man with a shrivelled hand on the Sabbath,  
 defying the Pharisees and insulting their legal ways (Matt 12).  
 Jesus heals people in the temple courts and the children give him praise:

**Matt. 21:14 - 15** The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when **the chief priests and the teachers of the law** saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were **indignant**.

The religious leaders were insulted by God's concern for the outcasts.

And at every testing from the Pharisees, Jesus refuted them  
 and demonstrated the true nature of the real Kingdom, the Kingdom of God.  
 The Kingdom of God which is so unlike Herod's kingdom  
 The Kingdom of God which is so unlike the kingdoms, or empires,  
 of Rome, of Britain, of Spain, of America... the list goes on

And so, Jesus is bad news to those who want to be worshiped.  
 Jesus is bad news to those who want control and power over others.  
 For them, Jesus, the Son of God, is not a Savior but a threat

All through the gospel the ones who were able to define who is "inside" the people of God,  
 failed to recognize God himself.  
 It was the "outsiders," the foreigners, who were able to recognize first, then offer worship.<sup>10</sup>

But why? Why would these wisemen come all the way to Judea, on the off chance that they will encounter something divine? Why risk their livelihoods, and their lives? Why bring such costly gifts?

The king of the Jews have been born. Somehow, it was enough to change the course of their

<sup>9</sup> Powell, "The magi as kings," 480.

<sup>10</sup> Weaver, "Rewriting the messianic script," 382.

lives, and I believe, changed the way they see the world.

Epiphanies, as divine disclosure, don't occur often.

Of course there are scientific discoveries,  
 like the one Copernicus brought forth  
 that revolutionized the way we think about the world and how we do things.

As Christians, we accept the Bible as a record of epiphanies

God reveals himself over and over again in human history.

But do we, ordinary folk, have epiphanies?

Has God revealed Himself to you?

I believe that He has...at least enough to have brought you here.

For me, it was being able to forgive a betrayal of friendship in my teenage years,  
 and experiencing the passion of Christ one Easter Sunday.

It was enough for me to learn about Jesus more through this book of epiphanies  
 and to be committed to a church

God revealed himself in ways such that I had to respond  
 in obedience and worship

it lead me to follow Jesus in baptism

which was another Epiphany event in the Bible:

**Matt. 3:16** -17 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

So when we are baptised, we are signalling our response to Jesus

we are symbolizing our union with Him

our reception of the Holy Spirit

and our fellowship with the church

our baptism marks our realignment, reorientation of our lives to Christ

it marks how we're different, and how our perception of the world has changed

I believe that God revealed himself to us in many, small ways – like the small specks of light in the night sky that come together to form a constellation. But do we see the picture? Do we “connect the dots”? Do we recognize, and... do we commit and go?

Some of us have. But perhaps it's been a long time since that first epiphany. Perhaps, it's been a long time since your baptism. Maybe that journey back home for those Magi was even more difficult, more treacherous. And when they got home, life became busy, scheduled....almost ordinary. But the question isn't whether your life is extraordinary because of Jesus, but the question becomes – **how are you different from the person you would have been if you never met him?** And how are you, a light (not THE light), but a light for others who *want* to know Him?

This story was fascinating to me, not just in how the Magi responded. But also what it tells us about how God calls people. It tells us that people may come to Jesus through ways we think

are inappropriate.<sup>11</sup> The magi were pagan astrologers. They were not Jews, but Gentiles. Yet for centuries they symbolized the nations coming to bow at the feet of the child Jesus. This route to Christ is unexpected and challenges us to think that people may come to faith in Jesus through different spiritual paths.<sup>12</sup>

This should give us hope  
This story should give us hope because it tells us something about God...

First:

God wants us to know Him.

The point of any divine epiphany is that God showing himself, he allows himself be known,  
to us... to all of us  
He does not hide nor pushes away  
but calls out to all who desire to draw near  
He wants all people to come to Him, and to be like Him  
to live in a way that pushes back against a culture that destroys the human soul

Second:

God's power is different and greater than the power of the world.

Jesus came as a vulnerable baby,  
through the womb of a young Jewish girl, pledged to a poor carpenter  
Jesus, becomes a refugee child, a threat to a violent king  
from the beginning, he was the object of injustice  
yet evil and darkness could not, and will not, thwart God's will  
He came in fulfilment of God's promises and intentions for the world

And so, God awaits our response, for this is what epiphanies do – they make us respond

Our responses, like epiphanies, can be expressed in many ways.

It could be reorienting our view of life by following a different calendar.  
It could be daily prayer and scripture reading  
It could be being baptised.  
It could be giving up giving up a certain lifestyle in order to help others  
It could be pointing others to the King....  
but that requires us to know what we're pointing to

Have you seen His light?

Perhaps you're struggling to believe that it's real  
Perhaps you have forgotten that first epiphany  
Perhaps we need to re-remember  
what pulled at our hearts  
what caused us to hope  
what brought us life  
what ultimately drew us to our knees in adoration  
of a small child named Jesus Christ, the Messiah, Immanuel

<sup>11</sup> Davis, "Matthew 2," 420.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, "Matthew 2," 420.