

## “Epiphany”

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January 8, 2023  
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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### Isaiah 60:1-6

*60 Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
2 For darkness shall cover the earth  
and thick darkness the peoples,  
but the Lord will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.  
3 Nations shall come to your light  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
4 Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together; they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried in their nurses' arms.  
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,<sup>[a]</sup>  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you;  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense  
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

### Matthew 2:1-12

*2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi<sup>[a]</sup> from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east<sup>[b]</sup> and have come to pay him homage.” <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah<sup>[c]</sup> was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd<sup>[d]</sup> my people Israel.’ ”*

*7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi<sup>[e]</sup> and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” <sup>9</sup> When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east,<sup>[f]</sup> until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped,<sup>[g]</sup> they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

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Today we celebrate Epiphany Sunday, one of the oldest feast days of the Christian church, which opens the season of Epiphany. Traditionally the *day* of Epiphany marks the day that Jesus

appeared first to gentiles, when the three magi came to Bethlehem. Then on the Sunday closest to that is usually marked by remembering the day that Jesus was baptized, celebrating Christ's holiness and humanity. Since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century when epiphany was first celebrated, traditions around this church holiday have been marked by celebrations involving kings, magicians, gifts, water, revelations, and mixed with cultural folk traditions. Orthodox Christians who celebrated Christmas yesterday will celebrate Epiphany on January 19<sup>th</sup>. Since water is said to be made holy on that day, many will mark the day by submerging themselves three times, or swimming in frigid water!

In Spain, children leave their shoes outside in hopes that they will be filled with treats. In Italy children receive gifts on Epiphany morning from a witch named La Befana. In Spain, Mexico and other Latino countries, a tiny figurine of baby Jesus is baked into a kings cake, to be revealed to the lucky eater just as Christ was revealed as the Son of God to the kings.

What a celebration the Church as a whole, has provided for this truly Good News, that Christ came for everyone. And yet, in whiplash speed, Matthew stuns us with a quick stomach punch of the next news:

Immediately after this text in Matthew, the next three lines of text that tell us that Joseph and Mary and Jesus escaped to Egypt. And the *next* three lines, tell of Herod's order that all children under the age of two in and around Bethlehem should be killed.

What?! This isn't the first time King Herod has ordered the death of any opposition – when he first came to the throne, he ordered the execution of members of the Sanhedrin (the close advisory rule making body) be killed, and he gave orders when he was dying that leading citizens in Jerusalem be killed so that there would be weeping in the streets at the time of his funeral. (Case-Winters, Matthew, p.28, footnote 15) This King who was a very small man afraid even of a babe.

It's almost as if the lectionary didn't even want to include the story because next week's lectionary doesn't pick up where today's text leaves off. These next six lines never come up. By the seventh verse, Jesus' family has returned from exile. So why ruin this Epiphany Sunday celebration with reminders of this horrible text, that's not even part of the lectionary today? Why remind us of this terrible scene that makes us feel like following Christ is like reading the line from Dante's inferno, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here."

For Matthew, the connection between the past and Jesus is crucial. First he lists the lineage of Jesus, to show the lineage all the way back to David and to Abraham. What follows is the telling of four events that each have a direct connection to a prior prophecy about the coming Messiah. First, our text for today: the location of the birth. When King Herod asked **where the child was to be born**, "They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Second, not read today but immediately following, the **exile to Egypt**. "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." Then, the terrible **story of the killing of the children** is told. "Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was

fulfilled: <sup>18</sup>“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” And finally for this section, Matthew writes about **Jesus’ return from Exile**. “There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazarene.”

The *season* of Epiphany, which begins today, will be filled with stories and lessons from the life of Christ. It’s as if Matthew is saying, ‘Before I tell you about the life, love and grace of what having the Messiah among us means, I want to assure you that Jesus is that Messiah by showing you that these old prophecies have come true in him.’

The magi, maybe kings, maybe wise men, maybe astrologers, seekers of some sort, followers of astrological signs or maybe they are you and me, everyday people open to the call of the mystery. They came on a journey following a call to seek the child. They entered Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” The human King, King of another kind, was immediately threatened and jealous and quickly decided to trick the magi into revealing where the child was. Angels though, always altering our ways, and alerting us to change, revealed Herod’s deceit to the magi, and after they paid homage to the child with their gifts, they went home another way.

Maybe we should think about what kind of star would we need to discover in order to be willing to follow? To what ends would we go? Are we curious enough? Would we make the journey without knowing? Would we pay attention to angels’ messages to change the path that we so bravely took in the first place?

We would think about human demagogues who lead us astray in the name of maintaining power and how we need to have our constant right star always in front of us leading us away from their grasp.

We could talk about Herod’s terrible order that all children two and under be killed, in light of the terrible destruction of children all around us to gun violence, each shooting being “surely” the last time.

We could talk about Jesus’ family having to leave their home under threat of death, recalling not only the Exodus of the Israelites, but reminding us of current exodus’ that happen now. Anna Case-Winters, writes, “With his family’s flight into Egypt, Jesus joins the company of all those who are hunted or homeless, migrants or refugees. Matthew’s telling of the desperate flight of Jesus and family does not lend itself to sweet, sentimentalized renderings we are more accustomed to seeing on Christmas cards.” (Case-Winters, Matthew, p.29)

Those would all be great discussions. Today, I want to back up from this specific scene and any specific correlations to remind us that epiphany means reveal. Today is the first day of a season of revealings. When I have an epiphany, it sounds as though I made it up. It was something I did and I had it, and now I will presumably go forth. Ah, now I see! Ah, now I understand! But what if we think of epiphany as something that has been revealed. With this thinking, the

revelation came from outside of me. It's not something I was in control of. Imagine you're a little kid, and you're looking around at many Christmas gifts. You choose one, open it, squeal with delight, and choose another and another. But the way I'm thinking of epiphany as reveal, it's as if you didn't choose the gift and open it, it opened on its own in its own time. You'd be sitting around looking at many Christmas packages, and at some time, one of them would open and reveal itself to you. And then another, and maybe even another. You don't know when, you're just waiting because it's so weird and delightful. It's a goofy thing to think of when you think of Christmas gifts. But it's not so goofy if you picture what it is like to experience the revelation of a gift from God. An epiphany is something that happens outside of us, to us, for us.

I don't know when it will come, I don't know what the gift is, I don't even know that I need a gift. Unlike a hallmark Christmas scene, there isn't one time when we all gather together with our friends and family, and sit by a tree and wait for revelations to happen, like Christmas gifts. Epiphanies reveal in their own time. This happens when we pray. The outcome doesn't come from us, it's not something we invent or create, and the timing isn't something we control.

It's important to begin the season of Epiphany in this year of reading from Matthew, remembering that the living witness of scripture goes back a long way. Our Christian tradition is a part of forever. The foundation in 2023 is just as solid as the foundation Matthew reminded us of when he reminded of the fulfillment of prophecy.

During this season of Epiphany, we are reminded to stay attuned. Diana Butler Bass describes Epiphany as being “,,, from the realms of mystery, awe, and wonder. They surprise and disrupt the normal course of existence. Epiphanies are not of our making.” She continues, “But it would be a mistake to believe that we are only passive recipients of epiphanies. We need to be alert for their appearance and search out the trailings of their presence. Revelations can be missed if one isn't attentive or attuned to the possibilities of sacred surprise.”

Maybe instead of Advent adult ed series' or Lenten adult ed series' we could have an Epiphany adult ed series called “Sacred Surprises.” I invite us to look around in new ways this season. Become aware of the movement of God in the world. Be ready for the surprises. What will be revealed?

Let us pray...