

Epiphany  
Matthew 2:1-12  
January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘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.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. 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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This morning is the last day of Christmas. For most of the secular world, Christmas ended on December 25<sup>th</sup> and the "holiday" season ended last Monday night. We left Advent and entered the Christmas season on the 25<sup>th</sup>. And then we walked through a very different time and space for 12 days, almost like we were on the other side of a transparent partition from the rest of the world, until we return to a more mundane time and space here on the feast of Epiphany.

On the first day of Christmas, we entered the mystery of the incarnation celebrating the way that God came to us in human form. In the center of the 12 days that followed, we encountered once again the poetic, timeless mystery of the Absolute made manifest. And today, we come to seek God's earthly presence in response to the light that has drawn us here together.

Because we seek God, we find God, our source, our life and our destiny.

Our readings give us three distinct encouragements to consent to the new life that God yearns to create through us. First, the prophet Isaiah, writing more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus, offers a reason to hope: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

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.” The author is writing after the return from the Babylonian captivity, and specifically about Jerusalem and the restoration of the Temple. He directs the eyes of Jerusalem to see her children coming home from far away; coming home to seek the presence of God, the shekinah, the glory of God in the form of light.

And there is more: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... 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.”

The prophet sees Israelites and non-Israelites being drawn to the light of the glory of God, and they will bring with them treasures of all kinds from all nations. And, as God promised through the prophet just a few chapters earlier: “I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer...for My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

The letter to the Ephesians speaks to the mystery revealed to Paul that confirms the beginning of Isaiah’s prophecy. The author declares that all human barriers are melted away by the light made manifest in Christ. All nations, all people, all races, classes and distinctions are welcome to share in the grace and dignity of the inbreaking realm of God.

The author of Ephesians casts light on what it means to be stewards of the mystery that “from the ages had been hidden in God, who has created all things...” Through the people gathered as the church, the rich variety of the wisdom of God can be revealed in new and unanticipated ways, even here at St. Elizabeth.

And finally, as if to hammer the point home, we hear Matthew’s story of a group of astrologers. They were not Israelites and they had no access to Hebrew scripture. Responding only to the natural world, these people came seeking. They were not kings and had no conquering armies. Acting only on their interpretations of omens and dreams, these people came seeking. They were not swayed by the powers of Empire and were all kinds of the wrong sorts of people. Drawn only by influences of the Divine, they came.

Whether they were pagan priests from Persia, astrologers from Arabia or foreign Gentiles or Judeans from Babylon, they came seeking. And, in recognition of who Jesus is, they brought with them gifts appropriate for a

king, saying “Where is the newborn king of the Judeans? For we saw his star at its rising and came to bow before him.”

Now, of course, the plain reading of Matthew’s story is that these seekers found Jesus, the Anointed One, born “King of the Judeans.” And we won’t hear that reference again until Jesus is arrested as an adult and is standing before Pontius Pilate. Between these two moments, Matthew tells the story of how Jesus practiced a form of servant “kingship” that promoted no violence, no vengeance or retribution – only a longing for us to be fully alive.

Matthew's epiphany story illustrates that there are countless ways for people to notice the Divine. Early in the "most Jewish" of the four Gospels, Matthew shows us that knowledge of Hebrew scripture and a specifically Jewish hope are not required to notice and seek the mind and the light that was in Jesus the Anointed.

This Gospel reading is a story of a joyful discovery for the feast-day of all “those who seek God or a greater knowledge of God,” as we will pray in a few minutes. That, by the way, is not just a prayer for other people’s conversion to Christianity, but a prayer that each of us and all seekers everywhere will in some way encounter the incarnation of God in our daily lives.

It’s a prayer that a twinkling or a flash of light might interrupt our habitual way of thinking just long enough to cause us to shift our perceptions. Once we have allowed our hearts and minds to be changed, we can return to our own countries by another road – a different path back into the lives we have been given.

Zen Master Hongzhi once said, “When the stains from old habits are exhausted, the original light appears, blazing through your skull, not admitting any other matters.” Imagine being like the magi who sought an earthly king only to have their expectations shattered and then replaced by persuasive new light on the nature of reality and the sacred.

God, the Originating Light, came to us and so we come to God. We find God because we seek God. And if we trust the message of Christmas and Epiphany, we can be open to finding Christ in unexpected expressions and forms. My own curiosity and delight in exploring other traditions and religions has deepened and broadened my own Christ-centered trust in God and my experiences of the Divine.

And, as Christ-centered people, Episcopalians participate in God's revelation through worship that both clarifies and expresses our perception of the One we are worshipping. The star still shines in the darkness for those who notice and seek it. Even now, it rests over your own heart; it hovers over this very sanctuary.

Because both the church and each one of us *is* a potential epiphany.

If the star seems tiny and dim, that only means you have a walk ahead of you. The star is there and those who seek are never alone. Walking beside them, nations stream. A multitude of camels, the young camels of Midian and Ephah and all those from Sheba seek beside them.

We bring the very best of ourselves, gold and frankincense. We also bring myrrh, the perfume of death, the bitterest herbs of our darkest selves. We bring everything we are and have as gifts for Jesus the Anointed One.

We bow before Christ, the light of the world, honored and reviled as the King of the Judeans. And we remember what Jesus, our brother, born to Mary and Joseph, taught; that you and I are also the light of the world. Along with all of creation, we were each and all created to be a temple filled with the light of God's presence, awareness and love.

Christ has been born again within us and around us. And so, seek the star that guides by God's grace. Follow it until the light – the astonishing, healing and unexpected light – is once again made manifest. Live a life magnificently illuminated by God's silent, fiery glory. Become the epiphany light God created you to be. And shine into the lives of everyone you encounter.

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