

Matthew 2:1-12

The Visit of the Wise Men

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, ‘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.’ ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They 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 my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.’ ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

If you flip through the Epiphany section of our hymnal, you'll hear lots of descriptors for a star that shone bright on an ancient night.

O star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light!

As with gladness sages bold did the guiding star behold; as with joy they hailed its light, onward beaming bright.

Brightest and best of the stars of the morning, dawn on our pathway...Star of the east, the horizon adorning.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that a big bright star shone over the entire region. But big and bright doesn't do it justice. It was more of an eventful star. And it seems to me it'd be hard to miss.

I know we live in an age of technology, and we're tipped off to those evenings when we can expect extraordinary lights. Remember a few years ago there was eclipse fever, and every hotel room in the Upstate of South Carolina sold out so visitors could catch a glimpse? And own Jessica is a part-time astronomer: she's seen the Geminids meteor shower and rockets from Cape Canaveral in her backyard. But even in our city full of skyscrapers (did you know you can see more than a dozen of them from atop Trash Mountain!), you don't have to try very hard to notice a blood moon, or a particularly expressive star. Especially if you are observant.

I wonder then, how is that all the King's men, and all the King's horses, and every other part of the King's entourage didn't notice a star near Jerusalem, one that piqued the curiosity of wise women and wise men from far away? There wasn't ozone poisoning in First Century Palestine; the Industrial Revolution had not yet highjacked the horizon with towers of commerce, and most folks were still weary of Babel. And Herod was a great architect – I've been to his seaside villas, and marveled at the view from Masada. If you

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can't see bright shining stars from those lofty and clear perches, well, buddy, you aren't looking very hard.

All of this is to say that the center of Jewish power and culture was completely oblivious to God's epiphany in the world.

But before we jump on our soapboxes and chide Herod's crew for their self-centeredness and aloofness, it ought not be lost on each of us that the great majority of the modern West is blind to Epiphany as well.

The Great Schism "schism-ed," and Rome said, "Luke's story takes prominence, and Christmas is on December 25th, and we'll get around to Epiphany in another 12 days." And since they've already put out the Valentine's Day Candy at Walgreens, we just assumed the twelve drummers did their drumming on Christmas Day, and the partridge has long since left her pear tree. And besides, it's so much easier to put those wise people in the manger with all the other regulars. It's a new year after all, and we've got lots of work to do, and lots of people to see, and lots of places to go. And who's got time for stargazing in 2024?

Can't we slow down? I think our Greek Orthodox, and Eastern Orthodox, and Ethiopian friends may have it right. You see, on Christmas, we celebrate Emmanuel's birth and arrival. On Epiphany, whether it's January 6th, or January 8th, or even as late as January 19th in some traditions, we celebrate the manifestation or the realization of God's arrival for the broader world. In the Eastern tradition, Epiphany celebrates God's presence made known in a global sense – travelers from afar worship God in Israel. Eventually, the entire world will participate in a global table. Epiphany in the East also emphasizes the baptism of Jesus – Jesus is gonna go out into the world and live out his vocation.

Here's how I would describe the difference between Christmas and Epiphany. In the story of Christmas, I know that love is real – I know that it's not some false hope. God lives with us and loves with us in the world. A

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refugee child born in a manger, and hosted by strangers, and bathed in the light of a sacred star, and the sound of an angel chorus both intellectually and emotionally prepares me for the reality of God in the world. In the story of Jesus' birth, I can imagine love, and I can imagine God in my own life. But knowing love is possible, believing in love, hoping for love, even expectantly, isn't the same as experiencing love. Epiphany is the day God's love touches our own hearts. We can seek, and quest, and wander, and be diligent, and one day find our own oasis, our own new birth, our own manifestation of God's presence.

Epiphany is that point in the Rom-Com where one of the three Kates (Beckinsale, Hudson, or Winslet) is swept off her feet by one of the two Hughes (Grant or Jackman). Love isn't only possible, it's realized!

But here's why Matthew's story is better than a predictable Rom-Com. Its characters aren't air-brushed – they don't live in swanky apartments, work in exciting industries, or own impressive wardrobes. The truth is: Matthew's characters live in a violent and volatile world. Herod and his minions don't pay attention to stars (at least on their own) because they are too focused on enforcing their rigid status quo. They'll pull the levers and strings that keep those in power powerful and the weaklings weak. They've got revenues to ensure; voices to silence; egos and illusions to maintain; monuments to construct. And the empire's gonna strike back and strike out at any challenge – they won't pay any mind to stargazers until the stargazers threaten their power.

Hope, peace, joy, and love will be nurtured by women and men in the margins. Joseph will move his family from one safehouse to the next. Mary, like so many strangers in strange lands, will live with constant anxiety – she will balance the need to run basic errands with the danger of being exposed. There's a heaviness, too – an economy, and a culture, and a system that weighs, and strains, and burdens the least. There's never enough rest, or provisions, or safety.

Herod and his minions believe, just like the pharaohs before them, that their imposed chaos is an exercise in power and control.

But God is in control. God's love will not be undone. The world's gonna know a new way.

On January 6th of 2012, Epiphany, I found myself in Bethlehem of all places. But it didn't lie so still. I was with seminary classmates on an interfaith pilgrimage. We visited the Church of the Nativity, as well as the tombs of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs at Hebron.

Both areas are large Palestinian population centers, and because of their theological significance, are also deeply disputed and divided geographical areas for Israeli and Palestinian interests. Right at this very moment, they are at the center of tragic and unspeakable violence. The war-torn landscape bears witness to the pain of God's people.

Even before the current-day conflict, what you notice are the encampments. In Palestinian strongholds, Israeli residents are surrounded and marginalized, and in Israeli strongholds, Palestinian residents are surrounded and marginalized. And you can see these lines and pockets of poverty and privilege. Tourism and industry are non-existent for the marginalized in each little pocket.

Palestinian Christians eke out a living selling olive wood fares to the few tourists who can reach them in occupied areas. Muslims suffer the indignity of Jewish soldiers who pollute their side of Abraham's tomb with noise and litter. Jewish merchants crowd a tour bus that makes its way to their side of the fence, perhaps the only one they'll see this week. New pharaohs and Herods implement their own destructive policies and systems, intent on ignoring Epiphany stars. And yet the people are resilient.

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People of all faiths continue to carve out space; continue to seek peace; continue to hope for the day when they can worship God with even a hint of what those wise persons long ago experienced.

While in Bethlehem, I bought from those Palestinian Christians a German Prayer Cross carved from olive wood. You rub your thumb along its smoothed edges. Each time it's in my pocket, I am reminded that God's hands continue to smooth and soothe us like a balm.

While in Bethlehem, I visited a Palestinian Refugee camp. Muslim neighbors whom I'd never met served me tea, and prayed for me, and shared a little something of their lives.

While in Bethlehem, I haggled for the first time. I bought a ring for Jacqueline, and a couple of scarves, from a Jewish merchant. I'm not very good at haggling, but I did buy two tokens that in their own small way express a sense of profound love.

While in Bethlehem, on Epiphany, at the Church of the Nativity, I crawled on my belly through a little tunnel, and looked through a couple of portholes, to gaze upon what some consider the very stable and manger that hosted our infant savior. I watched two women of an Orthodox tradition weep, overwhelmed by the meaning of this spot. And afterwards, I shared coffee at a knock-off Starbucks with Jewish, Muslim, and Christian pilgrims as we reflected on Epiphany in this strange yet familiar place.

It wasn't a pretty day, nor even a pretty place. It was rugged. And raw. And blemished by the dirt, and noise, and commotion of a people going about their day. And yet it was beautiful. Here, in a world two thousand years removed from the first Epiphany, no less violent or imperfect than other times, strangers from afar, steeped in every imaginable tradition, gazed upon, and worshiped in God's presence. They saw a star that Herod will never see.

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I know I mentioned this to you last week, yes – it's a repeated thought. But it's Epiphany, and sometimes we just hear things anew:

I wonder if the sight of that old star provoked the words of Howard Thurman's famous poem *The Work of Christmas*:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

Good friends, today is Epiphany, 2024. May the Epiphany star always remind us that we live in God's world, not Herod's. And may the stars we gaze upon awaken the Christmas work in us this world so desperately needs. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.