

**Star Light**  
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**Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12**

So, the magi just show up in Jerusalem one day, total strangers, asking “Where is the child who has been born king of Jews?” How do they even know to come there? I mean, these magi are Zoroastrian priests, astrologers that studied the stars to discern the future. They are not Jewish, and they obviously do not have access to Micah’s writings, since they don’t know to go to Bethlehem. They just saw a star appear in the sky and set out on a super long trip that likely took upwards of two years to come worship this child they don’t even know.

And, at the same time, why didn’t Herod know? Herod is Jewish. And he has access to all the chief priests and scribes, who had all the information at their fingertips and studied it daily. Yet they didn’t have any idea that this child had been born in their own backyard until the magi showed up. There was no hesitation when Herod asked priests and scribes where the messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem of Judah, of course, it says so right here,” they tell him. But they had no idea he was already here.

This is the grace of the Epiphany story. On Christmas, the love of God burst into the world in a stable. And his ancestry, carefully listed out in the first chapter of Matthew, gives him claim to the kingship within the Jewish community. But on Epiphany, the grace of God extends outward, embracing all people within this story. No more is it contained with the shepherds at the stable. Even the most unlikely people are part of it, even more unlikely than the lowly shepherds, and these strangers know something about it that wasn’t known before.

I wonder what we would do if the magi walked into our church asking to be led to our king? Would we even know what to say when they asked where he was to be found? Like Herod, we have access to the scriptures. We are even surprisingly good at finding the places where the scriptures tell us what God looks like at work with and through us. But would we be able to tell them where he is...where we’ve seen him alive and in the world?

I’m a cradle Presbyterian, meaning I was born and raised in the church. I learned about God’s love the way kids learn about color. It was named for me over and over, different shades of God’s love, different things that were examples of God’s love, different times and places to apply my own attempt at God’s love, until eventually I came to have an understanding of what God’s love was like. Over time, I got better at identifying it for myself and naming it when I saw God at work in my life.

I remember having to write about my journey of faith in preparation for my seminary internships. I admitted that I had never had an epiphany moment when I went from not knowing to knowing God with all my heart. God's love had been woven all through my life and I can never remember a time when I didn't believe in God. I'm fascinated by the stories of lightning flash realizations and the stories of those who came to believe when they hadn't before. I listen to their stories with rapt attention, wondering where I might have become so complacent that I wouldn't notice these things.

My experience with God is the day-to-day sightings that form me, the thread of care shown throughout my entire lifetime. They are often subtle, but if I'm looking, they're everywhere in the ordinary things. You can ask my children who wonder at my ability to bring up Jesus in the middle of everything. But this story reminds me that we need to foster our ability to see God in our midst in the ordinary things and name it out loud, lest we become like Herod and the chief priests who missed it just because they didn't expect it.

Then there's the fact that Herod needed the magi to give him new information to find the baby. Yes, the scriptures had told them where. But the magi held a piece of the knowledge too – they knew when the star had appeared. Herod calls them back secretly to learn from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

This is another piece of grace in the Epiphany story. No one fully understands the majesty of God's love and call for us. God is a living God that is still active, still reaching out, still creating with us. And none of us can know who God calls. God's call extends beyond all the boundaries humans create. There's a lot of gatekeeping in the religious world. Maybe we assume we know because we've been here a long time. Maybe we are fearful that new ideas and understandings will change everything. Maybe we have decided that we need to protect the church from those who we deem not good enough.

I wonder what we would do if the magi walked into our church asking to be led to our king? Would we be quick to welcome them, to share the stories of our faith and listen to their revelations about our king? Or like Herod, would we be frightened by this new information, worried about losing our control, and clinging to ways it already is.

At my first call, in a big urban church in Texas, we would have people come in from time to time who needed to let us know that we were all things that were dangerous to the church. One needed to let me know that, as a woman...yeah, lady, wait until you know the whole story about that...I was leading my people to the devil because women do not belong in ministry. She didn't want to have a conversation, she just wanted to make it clear that we were not the church. Two times, people called or came in to yell at me, making sure we knew that our church was a fraud,

leading people astray. They knew because of that rainbow flag in the courtyard, proclaiming an all-inclusive welcome. Unable to change our hearts, they promised to pray for the souls of our congregation. We were the wrong kind of people, the outsiders with new ways of seeing God's radical love and they were fearful we would ruin the church for them. As if humans could actually ruin what God creates.

But it was the outsiders, the astrologers, using the same methods that the prophets warned them not to be fooled by, that sought and found Jesus in this story. It was when the old knowledge and the new knowledge were combined that the truth was made clear. The church is a place of grace, a place where God calls everyone, regardless of whatever limits we place on holiness, to share our insights, our epiphanies, and to talk and work through this mystery of faith, to transform our thinking and ourselves. When we meet new people and open ourselves to hear their stories, we just might find a new piece of truth and love.

Now what we do with it is another thing. Herod's respond was to harm, sending the magi out to find the baby and report back, supposedly to allow him to go and pay him homage. But, if we had continued to read the next part of the story, we would have discovered his plan to do away with the new king at all costs. I wonder how this story would have gone differently, if it would have at all, if Herod hadn't been so secretive with this news.

When the magi got there, they experienced an epiphany! They were filled with a sense of inner joy and delight at this manifestation of the divine. They fell on their knees and worshipped the infant. They gave all their treasures, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And moreover, having been warned in a dream (because God talks to whomever God wants to regardless of their background), they chose not to return to Herod, a choice that likely was a dangerous one, to do what they could to protect him. As usual, God is turning things upside down and these outsiders are now insiders, giving their worship, treasures, and lives to this infant king.

This is the grace of the epiphany. They are in the presence of the divine. It changes their trajectory, and they act in deep love, breaking all kinds of social norms. And God does this for us too. When we recognize where God has stepped into our lives, we can't help but respond with worship. Their worship is their actions, in the giving of their treasures, in warning the holy family to run, in choosing to defy the king they are visiting.

I wonder what we would do if the magi walked into our church today? Would we worship with them, in awe of the light? Or like Herod, would we promise worship in words only?

Increasingly, people are increasingly hesitant to speak out about their faith. We don't want to bother someone. We don't want to offend someone. We don't want someone to think we're

weird. So, we keep quiet. But honestly, it is less about what we say and more about what we do that speaks to our faith. St. Francis told his followers to preach always, and to use words if necessary. When we act with compassion, the light of Christ shines through us, and even if they don't understand, perhaps those around will experience an epiphany.

During the season of Epiphany, the church turns its attention to the ministry of Christ, who is the manifestation of the divine in the world. We see what it looks like to follow the one who is Light. But my hope for you this Epiphany season is that you would turn your eyes and heart to be ready to see the manifestation of the divine in your life. To find God at work in the ordinary moments. To see the pinpricks of light even in the hardest moments. To open your hearts to see God working through relationships even when we least expect it. To be transformed to be the light and arise and go share it with others, caring for the least of them and welcoming all of them. Amen.