

Epiphany: Your Time to Shine

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Preaching on:
Matthew 2:1–12

This morning we're recognizing and celebrating Epiphany, an ancient Christian feast day, which officially took place yesterday on the 6th. January 6th was Jesus' original birthday in Christian tradition. Many, many centuries ago, before Christmas, Epiphany was the double celebration of Jesus' nativity (that's why the Magi show up) and his baptism (because people believed he was baptized on his 30th birthday). And the baptism at that time was more important than the birthday actually.

Here in the West today, Epiphany is the end of the 12 days of Christmas, one final stop off at the manger, and in centuries past it was also one last feast, one last party as we left the holidays behind. Some of that celebration still lingers in other countries, but here in the US, Epiphany has never really played a big part in the secular holiday tradition, and January 6th is now unfortunately better known for other things around here. But this morning, I'd like to recommend not January 6th but Epiphany to the celebrations of your house and your heart.

What does "Epiphany" mean? Epiphany is an ancient Greek word. It's translated in the Bible as "appearance" or "brightness," but that doesn't do the word justice. Literally, we could translate it as "the shining on," but the shining on what? Well, Epiphany always means in the Greek the manifestation of a god or a heavenly being on the earth. When Homer in the Iliad or the Odyssey, writes about a god or a goddess showing themselves to a mortal or intervening in some battle or other mortal affair, he doesn't say "Athena shows up" or "Athena pops by" he says, "Athena shines." In our scripture reading this morning when Herod secretly calls for the Magi to find out more about the star, he doesn't ask them when the star first appeared, he asks them when the star first shone.

The Epiphany of Christ could be translated as the "Appearance of Christ," but that translation is boring and incomplete. A better, more poetic, and more personal translation of the Epiphany of Christ is "the Shining of Christ on *US*"—on *YOU*. And I think that's a better way to exit the Christmas season—with a reminder that Christ is shining in the world and shining directly onto you—rather than a hangover on New Year's Day and then back to work with all kinds of promises to be a better, more productive, more disciplined person. Nothing wrong with a resolution, nothing wrong with a little self-improvement, but Christmas isn't about you trying harder at life. It's about what God is doing in your life, it's about the light of Christ in your life, and how you respond.

So, let's talk about the first responders—the Magi. We usually call them the "Three Wise Men" or the "Three Kings." Let me blow your mind here: In our scripture reading this morning there's nothing that says there were three Magi. Could have been two, could have been 12. We don't know. There's nothing about them being wise or being kings. And, as was already beautifully demonstrated to us this morning by our three wise women, we don't even know if they were men! Saying that they were "three wise men" is just more comfortable to Christian tradition than reinforcing the specific reality that Jesus' first visitors were a bunch of foreign magicians. But there was something special about these pagan magicians—they were able to see what most people couldn't—the shining of this new star.

In our Christmas celebrations, the star of Bethlehem is usually really huge in the sky. You couldn't miss

the thing! And that makes sense because otherwise it wouldn't make a great decoration. But it's pretty clear from the scripture reading (and from historical records) that this star wasn't a supernovae or a comet. It wasn't some big, obvious sign in the sky that everybody saw. Maybe it was a star that nobody else in the world, but these Magi, had noticed. It must have been small. Maybe it was dim. Maybe in a sky full of bright lights, it was lost in the background. In other words, those Magi must have been paying attention to the light. They must have been looking for it.

When Athena appeared in the Iliad, she shone, and then she grabbed Achilles by the hair and she turned him around to look at her. That's quite an entrance! I wouldn't mind God showing up like that in my life to be honest. Very direct. Hard to ignore. And it happens here and there. But for the most part our God, our Jesus, doesn't show up like with a bang to the heroes of the world. Our God shines gently for the whole world to see. And we have some work to do to be able see it. And then after we see it, the journey into the world can begin.

Hopefully, you've gotten a glimpse of the light this Christmas season. The journey to the manger is over. And now, just like the Magi, we must return to the real world. But the Magi receive one final dream that tells them to go home by another way. Don't go back the way you came. You've seen the light, you've followed the light, you've received the shining of the baby on you, now you must return to real life on an altered trajectory. Don't re-enter by the same door you left through. You are transformed, so find a new way forward.

Beloved, the Shining of Christ on *YOU* is not an invitation to a passive admiration; it's a call to an active transformation. We are meant to be like the Magi: seekers, finders, and then bearers of the light, bearers of good news wherever we go. Yes, the world is filled with conflict, anxiety, violence, greed, sorrow and despair. You see that clearly, of course you do. But you have also seen the light that shines in the darkness. And you know that the darkness shall never overcome it. And that is a faith and a hope that the rest of the world needs to hear from you.

We're called to embody the light, to be mini-Epiphanies in a world that has grown accustomed to shadows. In a world obsessed with the fame of "stars," we're called to point out the one star that matters most, lost in the light pollution of a hungry, consuming culture. We go back into the world as vessels of the light we have encountered. We're called to illuminate the dark corners, to warm the cold places, to guide like the Bethlehem star.

Don't hide your light under a bushel. Don't give up this broken world. God hasn't given up on it. And God sees us—you and me—as the lamps that will light the way to a new dawn. We must meet injustice with fairness and mercy, pain with healing and compassion, violence with resolve and love. Jesus shines on us and we reflect that light.

Shining on others as Jesus shines on us is the true calling of those who have seen and known the

light. This is the heart of Epiphany. This is the journey. Beloved, Christmas is ending, but we must shine on. Shine on for the world. Shine on, in service of the one who shines on us.