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## **Epiphanies**

Matthew 2:1-12

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The feast of Epiphany rarely falls on a Sunday, so each year, it's a bit of a toss up come January, as to which Sunday will be the one to recognize Epiphany. Officially recognized this past Tuesday, Jan. 6, Epiphany is our focus in today's worship.

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That word "Epiphany" might just be the most beautiful word in the liturgical calendar. "Epiphany"—Just to say it, "Epiphany", feels like an epiphany itself, doesn't it?

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If you hear nothing else in this message, remember that Epiphany is all about expansion.

The Greek word translates in English as "reveal" or "manifest", to make something known that was not previously known.

For as delightful a word it is to say, it has a very disruptive connotation. There is an edge to it.

Epiphanies are interruptions that awaken us to a discontent with the accepted way of things, disruptions that dislodge us from the current course and set us on a whole new path.

In the context of Matthew's Gospel—and for its original Jewish audience—the epiphany was the revelation that the Good News of Jesus Christ had expanded also to the Gentiles—and so, to all the world. It's the truth that we affirm in the story of the Magi's visit to Bethlehem.

Just imagine how radical of an idea that would have been for early hearers of the Gospel. This was atypical in Judaism. Jesus was Jewish, his disciples were Jewish; and yet, early on, there was this great impulse to expand and include—to take the message to the world.

An epiphany, in itself.

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We have to know that the story of the Magi's visit to see the infant Christ wasn't simply the iconic moment that shows up on Christmas cards; it was a journey . . . a journey of expansion.

These foreign kings crossed borders and into a new territory in search of the Divine.

Perhaps that's a first lesson for us: **Often times, arriving at the sacred is a border-crossing exercise.** There is an element of risk, leaving the familiar. Epiphanies are dis-comforting in that way.

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The second chapter in Matthew sets up the story as one that takes place "during the time of King Herod". Now, Herod was a violent ruler that was given the title "King of the Jews" by the Roman empire—a claim the Jewish people themselves rejected. Herod's taxation was excessive and oppressive. He pandered to the powerful. He had little regard for the real needs of the people and left them with precious few resources, which diminished any sense of agency, security, or empowerment.

And in the mix of that tension and dis-empowerment, the Magi (who were political advisers to the powers back home) arrive with all their own political clout and ask, “Where is the child who has been born ‘king of the Jews’”?

As my kids would say, “That’s savage”. Talk about being immediately cancelled!

AND they came to pay him homage, no less.

Herod heard this and was frightened—likely a fear of being unseated or that a revolt would rise up against him.

The Magi risked the journey anyways.

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I see, in our reading for today, a series of epiphanies on this journey I’d like to bring to light.

A first is how the Magi **allowed their curiosity to expand beyond what they already know.**

They notice a star that doesn’t fit their existing maps of the sky. Instead of explaining it away, the Magi allow their understanding of the world to stretch.

They make room for the possibility that reality is larger than their current explanations. And these were pretty smart persons—men and, some have argued, women too.

The expansive thinking here begins:

When we resist the urge to shrink mystery into certainty,

When we let questions open us instead of threatening to close us off,

When we trust that God may be doing something beyond our usual categories.

In this new year, can we too allow our curiosity to expand us, or will it shrink us back into what we already know?

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Secondly, **the Magi let their world grow bigger than home.**

The Magi didn't just *think* differently, they let their curiosity push them to move and travel beyond familiar borders—geographical, cultural, and intellectual.

They left what is known and comfortable to step into what is possible.

Expansion can happen when we realize that growth requires movement, empathy and understanding deepens only through encounter with the unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

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Thirdly, **they discover that the Sacred lives not at the center of the powers and institutions but at the margins.**

The journey for the Magi begins in Jerusalem. There, they assume the revelation will align with political and religious centers.

Herod is anxious and becomes unmoored, the city is disturbed, and the religious experts know all about the prophecy but fail to go and see.

The Magi quickly learn that God's activity is not confined to palaces, titles, or even correct theology.

There is an expansion in learning how God's light is often found at the edges, not the center.

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## **Fourth, the Magi expand their definition of power and kingship.**

The star leads them not to an oligarch, but to a child, not to a throne, but to a manger.

This is the moment when their imagination stretches the furthest. Kingship is redefined. Greatness looks smaller, quieter, more vulnerable than the expectation.

They learn there is divinity in the ordinary.

There is honor and glory in simplicity, without grandeur.

And there is worship that needs no explanation, only adoration.

They didn't demand a full run-down of the child-king, they merely knelt and rejoiced.

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**Lastly, they leave changed, seeing the world with an expanded vision.**

This final expansion happens on the way home.

Warned in a dream, they return home by another road. This isn't just a change in route—it's a change in perspective. Once your vision has widened, you cannot move through the world the same way again.

We too can learn that epiphanies don't just enlighten us, they reroute us. They set us on another path altogether.

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I had an epiphany some years back.

I often think back to an experience I had in a seminary classroom one day. The question around the tables was whether or not Christian service—doing good in the world—is valuable and effective for God's kingdom if the person doing it doesn't express their Christian intentions. We debated whether someone could serve someone else and it be what God wants if they don't provide an opportunity for an evangelistic response—was it then null and void?

Now, just saying that out loud makes it sound so petty. But back then, some 20-some-odd-years ago, I was quite convinced that no good could be done in this world outside of an evangelical Christian's doing. This meant, one couldn't love and serve their neighbor out of compassion without having a coming-to-Jesus moment as a caveat.

Then, through a series of events that followed years after, I came to an epiphany. In that time, I saw the transformational work of compassion, when someone sacrifices on behalf of another—time, resources, energy. I saw how love always brings out a fullness in those we direct our loving actions toward, regardless of the source.

I had an epiphany that the work of compassion *is* the work of the kingdom of God. That God abides in acts of love, because love is the very essence of God. Compassion, community-building, belonging, taking care of the vulnerable—all of this isn't just what pleases God, it is the manifestation of God. It's how we know God is in the world.

I went home another way. And that road has made all the difference.

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We, especially in the church seem to be challenged to venture out from the familiar and established ways of our tradition.

“The frozen chosen”, I’m afraid, isn’t the nickname Presbyterians have earned solely by their lack of expression in worship. Can it be that we find a spot of comfortability and we tend to make a settlement out of it?

So that, when something comes along to disrupt our established ways, we don’t welcome it with open arms as an opportunity but we perceive it as a threat.

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James Forbes was the towering black preacher who pastored the Riverside Church in my neck of the woods, Harlem, a couple of decades ago.

Some years ago, he preached an epiphany sermon in which he opened up about his own journey from the familiar and the comfortable to the unfamiliar and disruptive. And I’d like us to hear his own words.

He reflects back:

"Years ago, when I was living in North Carolina, someone said to me, 'Brother Forbes, do you think the gospel can be preached by someone who is not Pentecostal?'" He thought: "Well, I wasn't sure, for it was the only preaching I had known, but I imagined that it could happen even if I hadn't seen or heard it. Indeed, I found out some time later that it was so."

Then after he had moved away from his hometown, someone else said to him: "'Rev. Forbes, have you ever heard the true gospel from a white preacher?' Well, in theory I knew it had to be true for God doesn't withhold the Spirit from anyone. Though I had my doubts that a white preacher could speak with power, I came to a point in my life where I had to say, 'Yes, I've heard it!'"

And after some time went by, there was a new question concerning the ordination and vocation of women. He was asked, "Could the gospel be preached by a woman even though the holy scriptures led a woman to keep silence in the church?"

Forbes said: "I had to ponder this, for it went against what I had known in my own church and there was much resistance from my brother clergy. But I listened to my sisters and before too long I knew the Spirit of God was calling them to preach. Who was I to get in God's way?"

"Now I thought I had been asked the last question about who might be called to bring the word of the Lord. But I found out I was wrong. A new question has been posed to me, and many of you know what it is. 'Can gay men and lesbian women be called to preach the word of God?'

Oh, I know what the Bible says and I know what my own uneasiness says and I can see that same uneasiness in some of your faces. But I've been wrong before, and the Spirit has been nudging me to get over my uneasiness. Sometimes we forget Jesus' promise—that the Spirit will lead us into all truth. Well, that must have meant the disciples didn't know it all then, and maybe we don't know it all now."

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Have there been moments in your life when all of the sudden you understood things more deeply, or in a different way?

Maybe you, like me, can think back on the story of your life and recognize a series of mile markers that can be understood as little epiphanies that shaped the person you are today. I've been grateful this week to do that little mental exercise myself.

That cheesy bumper sticker came to mind for me. I know we've all seen in its various forms: "Wise men still seek him". Now, I would add women and non-binary folk, and remove the masculine pronoun for God. But you get the point.

I urge us in this new year to remind yourself to stay open for when something comes along to expand our ways of thinking. It just might be the way we journey to the Sacred.

The Magi were led to the Divine through unconventional tools of their own spiritual context—they observed the night sky, they listened for sacred wisdom in their dreams.

Might it be that we too can open ourselves to whatever form God's revelation might come?

I pray it be so. Amen.

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## »SERMON TIMING

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125-35 words=1 minute

15-minute sermon ~1,875-2,025 words

12 pages = ~15 mins. (target 11-13 pages)

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## »SERMON OUTLINE

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WORKING TITLES:

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## »NOTES

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“King of the Jews” wasn’t necessarily a title with which one was endowed, as much as being a projection from the people and the powers of the day. And reappropriating this title to the baby born in poverty to immigrant parents would have been a slight like none other.