

## **“What is an epiphany anyway?”**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

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Scene 1

So what were these visitors, these strangers, doing? Why were they making such a long trip from Persia to Palestine? They were seeking an epiphany. Epiphany means manifestation. Visitors came to Bethlehem 2000 years ago to see the manifestation of a ruler. The visitors came to Jerusalem to see God, and they came bringing gifts. That is why people visit church today. To see God. And even today they come bringing gifts.

Next to Easter, Epiphany is the oldest church season of the year. At first it celebrated the birth and the baptism of Jesus on January 6th. January 6 was chosen as Epiphany because it was the winter solstice. The emphasis was upon the re-birth of light. As today's lesson from Isaiah tells us, "Arise, shine; for your light has come." Then other dates were chosen to celebrate the birth and baptism of Jesus, but January 6th was retained as the date we celebrate evangelism, and celebrate our visitors. The star of Bethlehem guides the magi to Jesus, the light of the world. And those magi come bearing gifts. We, the members of this faith community, are benefited as much by our visitors as our visitors are benefited by us.

Arise, shine," says the prophet Isaiah. "Your light has come." Problem is, many of us can't see it.

Scene 2

When we read this passage in the original Greek, we notice that Jesus' visitors are not described as kings, may not have been all that wise, and we do not know for sure even how many visitors he had that night. The visitors are called Magi, who were Persians (from modern day Iran) who study the stars and who interpret dreams. And here is another item that might get you to thinking, in the Greek they are not even described as men. Yes, they could have been women. All three of my three favorite English translations calls them wise men, and we have assumed there were three because there were three gifts. But the word Magi does not imply three, that they were wise, or even that they were men. And no translation implies they were kings.

Some of you may say such discussion falls into the category of saying committee CHAIR instead of chair-MAN, eliminating the word "he" when referring to God, and looking for evidence in the Bible that women have at least equal if

not superior status to men. Did you hear the one about who it is that should get up first in the morning to make the coffee, a man or a woman? They have a whole book in the Bible about it. The title of the book is HE-brews. And did you hear the one about the creation story? God created men out of dirt, but women out of prime rib!

Well, if it is unwise to call the Magi men, perhaps we should change the title of the song to "We three fairly sagacious persons!" or, "We three strange astronomers!"

While we are getting our facts straight, lets look at when the Magi visited Jesus. Yes, the typical manger scene has a crowd. Smelly shepherds and strange astronomers visiting the same night. But scripture says the Magi visited Jesus' house, not his manger. And it says when the Magi do not report back to Herod, Herod ordered all the male babies under two years of age killed. Scholars think the Magi visited about one year after Jesus' birth. Not the same night as the shepherds, not even 12 days after Jesus' birth. But a year or so later.

The underlying point I am making here is not that the Magi were women, but that our culture dictates our perceptions, and sometimes we need new lens so we can see reality better than through the lens our culture provides.

Our human eyes are stocked with specialized cells so sensitive that they can detect very small amounts of visible light. Our human eyes do pretty well for us. Each eye has about 125 million rods and cones, specialized cells with such enormous sensitivity that some can detect a mere handful of photons of visible light. The National Geographic says that the particular position of our eyes, protected by the skull and located close to the brain, is evidence that visual data is important to our well-being. About one-fifth of our brain has the job of doing nothing but processing information from the visual world around us.

One of the absolute wonders of our world is that it is full of light, even on dark and gloomy January days — but only a tiny sliver of all this radiance is visible to us. But our human eyes are designed to detect only what we call visible light, which is a tiny slice of the electromagnetic spectrum - it's the part made up of light with relatively short wavelengths. All other forms of light are completely invisible to us.

But in order to capture the light of God that is coming into the world, to see the importance of visitors and the gifts they bring, we need a whole new set of sensors. Perhaps we need a whole new way of seeing.

Lets look at several ways of looking at the world.

The eyes of narcissism do not work for us. When we look at visitors as outsiders, we never change. We always remain the same. We stay in a rut. It has been said that I will be the same person tomorrow that I am today, except for the places I go and the people I meet. A church is not a locked down community surrounded by the Berlin wall. It is a dynamic, ever changing, community that adapts to the changing needs of its members and their environment. The eyes of narcissism do not work. Instead, we use our eyes to see the needs of our visitors.

Beehive eyes also do not work for us. Visitors are not a potential source for more worker bees. The gifts visitors bring are not mindless fulfillment of our

own agendas. Instead, we use our eyes to see in our visitors the gifts of inspiration and the ability to chart new paths that usher in God's commonwealth.

I scratched my glasses when I fell recently, and have trouble seeing out of them. I have not had time to pick up another prescription. I do not need a corneal transplant. I just need new glasses.

Perhaps all of us need new glasses. New lenses.

It may be the lens of Scripture, from which we've been away too long. It's a new year. Time to get back to the Word. We'll see better.

It may be the lens of the church: We need the encouragement and support of a community of faith. It's a new year. Time to get back to the church. We'll see better.

It may be the lens of worship: We need to feed our souls so that the eyes of faith will remain healthy. It's a new year. Time to get back to worship. We'll see better.

It may be the lens of service: We need to get outside of ourselves to minister to others. Removing the focus from ourselves to others will make the eyes of faith much stronger. It's a new year. It's time to get back to service. We'll see better.

It may be the lens of love: We need to apply compassion and charity to those around us. Love is the ointment that heals the eyes of faith. It's a new year. Time to get back to love. We'll see better.

Or it maybe the lens of openness to visitors, and the gifts of new ideas that they bring.

Magi from the East came looking for Jesus, and after working their way around Herod they found the baby in a house with Mary his mother. They offered him wonderful gifts. The Magi had eyes of faith. They could see a faint flicker of light in the middle of the darkness, a light that signaled the presence of God's Son, Jesus.

If we look hard for Jesus in situations of chaos and confusion, we too will discover him. If we train our eyes on the small glimmers of light that appear in our shadow times, we will emerge from the blackness that threatens to overwhelm us.

And if we look for Jesus in our visitors, we will find him.

### Scene 3

Frightened King Herod inquires of the chief priests and scribes, who tell him of the prophecy: Bethlehem is to give the Messiah birth. Herod sends the astrologers to Bethlehem as spies. Herod and all of Jerusalem is frightened, and Herod inquires and sends.

Faith eyes can pick up divine light in times of deep darkness, and this was as true in the first century as it is today. There wasn't much brightness in Judea in the time of King Herod, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem - in fact, Herod's reign was an absolute orgy of violence and bloodshed. Full of insecurity, Herod ordered the killing of his brother-in-law, his uncle and then his wife. Fearing loss of power, he went on to execute his mother-in-law, a son and then two more

sons. At one point, Caesar Augustus remarked that he would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son!

And this list of murders doesn't even include the massacre of the infants, which Herod ordered in a desperate attempt to kill the baby Jesus. He commanded the slaughter of all the children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old or under ... but fortunately Mary and Joseph spirited Jesus away to Egypt before the massacre began (Matthew 2:13-18).

Dark days.

But I believe that stranger you met the other day brought you a gift. It may have been the gift of a smile, or a word of encouragement, or laughter. He or she brought you a gift. But unless you let down your mask, the mask which conceals your true self, that stranger will always be a stranger. He or she will never find a room in your heart or they in your heart. If only we were not so suspicious of and careful not to share our hearts with other people. How much more giving of smiles, encouragement, and laughter might we be? And might we receive?

Visitors, strangers, bring gifts to Jesus. Strangers bring gifts that enrich the lives of the Holy Family. Apostle Paul tells us we the church are the body of Christ. Strangers bring us gifts. We need to get over any wisps of xenophobia, and do more than just welcome strangers who visit us. Yes, we even need to do more than just call them and write them letters. We need to really get to know them. And we get to know them in Sunday school, Wednesday nights, Thursday afternoon Bible study, worship in the nursing home on Sunday afternoons, and feeding the homeless. If we do not spend the time really getting to know them, they will always be nothing more than visitors, and they, like the Magi, will go back from where they came. You may have commitments on Sunday mornings after worship, on Weds nights, Thursday afternoons, Sunday afternoons, and noon the third Weds of each month. But those are missed opportunities for getting to know new people.

We are all busy. When presented with multiple opportunities, we all have to choose. I believe today's lesson tells us about choices a band of astrologers made, yes. But I believe it also tells us choices the Holy Family made. On a personal level, to let in strangers and the gifts they bring into our hearts. And on a community level, to let strangers and the gifts they bring into our church into our souls.

### Conclusion

We the church, God's Holy Family, the body of Christ, are called to make choices. To be in community, to be a faithful community, do we need to do more than meet and greet? Isn't God calling you today to choose to get to know the visitors' hearts? So they can get to know your hearts? Sunday school after worship, the coffee hour, potlucks, Sunday afternoon at the nursing home, Wednesdays at 6, Thursday Bible study, and the third Wednesday of each month at the soup kitchen are opportunities for strangers to get to know our hearts. Isn't God calling you today to at least one of them?

Today's scripture challenges us to ask ourselves what are we seeking. To ask ourselves what would be our epiphany. But I believe it also asks us to help others find what they are seeking. To help others find epiphany. This is how we grow our church's spirituality. Not just by seeking epiphany, but also by helping others find their epiphanies.