

“Reclaiming Epiphany”
Matthew 2:1–12
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January 5, 2025

We celebrate Epiphany today, though technically it is January 6. It is one of the oldest festivals in Christian tradition, dating back to the late second century in Egypt. In contrast to Christmas, which did not begin until the middle of the fourth century, Epiphany is a time to celebrate the birth of Christ, the baptism of Jesus, and Jesus’ first miracle — all markers of beginning for this new expression of God’s love.

The story about the visit of the Magi, which we traditionally read, became a part of the celebration in western Europe, and it fits neatly into the pattern of this day. The word *epiphany* means “appearance” or “manifestation” and it refers to the manifestation of God’s love to the whole world. The Magi, outsiders to Jewish culture and faith, are representatives of the world.

Of course, the truth is Epiphany has lost some of its luster in our culture not for any theological reason but because it’s difficult to compete with Santa Claus, Rudolph, Frosty, and the Grinch. These icons of cultural Christmas have an impact on not just our culture but the church as well, as people want to jump over the themes of Advent and move straight to the sights and sounds of Christmas the day after Thanksgiving. So, we have battles about how long to leave up these “Christmas” decorations — until Christmas Eve, when Christmas proper begins, or not until Epiphany, when Christmas ends. Some of us have the same battles in our homes, but I will not comment on that here...

The one exception to the loss of place for Epiphany is a kind of pageant many of us have experienced which normally gets a number of things wrong but at least one big thing right. I am talking about the procession of the Magi bringing gifts, usually as the congregation sings “We Three Kings of Orient Are” with gusto!

In one setting where I served, it was one of the most beloved traditions. Young people, both male and female, would wander in wearing royal

garments and crowns, the latter of which they struggled to keep on their heads. Everyone liked the experience better if at least one crown fell off!

The procession always included one character who didn't quite fit in because she was not a child but an adult with significant cognitive limits. Yet she was childlike and enjoyed this day like no other, as did her parents, which was a large part of why the pageant was so beloved. Finally, these royals would present their gifts to the Christ child as we sang, "O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light."

So, what did this pageant get wrong? In the biblical story, the visitors from afar are not Kings, they are Magi, philosophers from the East with an interest in astronomy, perhaps Zoroastrian. We don't know how many of them there are. The number "three" has been deduced from the different gifts that are brought — gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And while the pageant I have described was gender-inclusive, there were wise guys and wise gals, most processions like this are not because Kings are male, except they are not Kings, nor do we know their gender. We could try to sing, "We indeterminate number of philosophers of unknown gender from the East are..." but it doesn't fit the meter.

But while these pageants often get all this wrong, what they get right is that they capture the spirit of this day, the call to celebration, the outrageous festivity that ought to accompany our recognition of the beginning of this story we call the gospel. The history of sacred art reflects the significance of Epiphany with most of the great artists depicting it, as does literature and poetry from T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" to James Taylor's "Home by Another Way." So should our celebration this season! So many of the central themes of our faith are found in this story about the Magi that it is worth whatever it takes to reclaim Epiphany, whether we have a pageant or not.

One theme of our faith that is found here is tied to the identity of the Magi. They are outsiders, foreigners, Gentiles, but they are included in the story. In fact, not only do they get to meet the Christ-child and thus be exposed to the good news God is bringing through him; God uses them to help underscore who Jesus is. God is involved in the lives of people from a different culture and religion.

It is an early sign that the good news this child brings will be for all people of all places. Jesus associates with Jews and Gentiles, he ministers to insiders and outsiders, and his commission recorded in Matthew 28 is to make disciples of all nations.

We think of this as a new trajectory of divine concern, but it is not. Israel is viewed as a chosen nation, but it is chosen *so that* it can be a light to all nations. This theme is found in numerous places in the book of Isaiah, including today's reading which says Israel's light has come, God's glory has risen, and thus, nations shall come to their light.

God's concern has always been for all God's children, but now the scope of divine concern is made even clearer. Not only will the light in Christ be revealed to all people, but God will use people outside our faith to do so. This may seem startling, but God often surprises us in the ways God works. God is not bound by our expectations.

This universal concern not only has implications for how we view God; it has implications for how we view others in this world. As the Apostle Paul tells the churches of Galatia, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). There are no longer categories of "us" and "them" because God's concern is for all and thus our calling is to embrace all.

This may sound like obvious, low-hanging fruit in the realm of Christian proclamation, but it flies in the face of all racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, political isolationism and religious intolerance — all of which are embraced by many evangelicals today. The good news, which begins with Epiphany, startles people who want the world to match their design and God to fit into their box.

Another theme of our faith we find in this story, one that follows naturally on the truth we have just named, is that those who are involved in the Jesus story inevitably face danger. The Magi come in search of a child who has been born King of the Jews, or at least this is the title they give him. Jesus will resist this title because of its political implications and inflammatory potential. The Magi discover the latter when another person who is called King, Herod, learns about their search for a Jewish King. The sitting ruler doesn't tolerate any talk of a new ruler.

He summons his select group of priests and scribes and asks where the Messiah will be born. They say, “In Bethlehem.” Then, he summons the Magi, asking when the star appeared to them, and encouraging them to find the child and send him word so that he can pay homage to him.

The Magi aren’t fooled. They find Jesus, honor him with gifts, and pay him homage but then travel home by a different way because they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. As we know, their concern is warranted. After our reading, Herod ends up having all the young children in and around Bethlehem killed in an effort to get Jesus.

The Magi are in danger because of their association with Jesus. Jesus’ own life is at risk, as are the lives of all children who live near where he is born. And this pattern will continue throughout Jesus’ ministry up until the point of his death on a cross, as it will follow his disciples after his death and resurrection.

Why is it dangerous to associate with him? The rulers of this world don’t much care for someone moving in on their territory and directing how people live. Jesus turns all expectations upside down and sets in motion the transformation of the world, which we see as a good thing, but those who benefit from the way things are do not. Thus, faithfulness to Jesus inevitably leads to conflict and danger.

I have shared with some of you before these words of the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a pastor in Birmingham, Alabama during the civil rights movement and colleague of Dr. King’s (*A Fire You Can’t Put Out*, Andrew M. Manis, p. 220).

[Religion] ought to have the same thrust that John the Baptist had when he went to tell Herod he was wrong... and when Elijah went to Jezebel... or Elijah when he challenged the 450 prophets [of Baal]. It’s ‘both/and.’ It has to do with your prayer life and... how you live... whether you live under oppression. Whether or not somebody’s challenging the oppression. Because it was never God’s will, in my estimation... for oppression to be the order of the day anywhere... I always remember what Dr. [William Holmes] Borders said, ‘The book of Acts is an action book. The gospel will get you in trouble; but God will get you out.’ That’s a

true statement. And if you aren't... running over somebody's feeling, making and overcoming enemies, then it's not the gospel.

This may sound extreme to us, but it is the nature of religion or at least following Jesus. If we not only believe in him but seek to live like him, on behalf of others, people will be startled and danger will be involved.

And yet, this is not the final word from Epiphany. The most important theme of our faith found here is that all of this is worth the trouble because God's way of love and justice is being extended to all. The Magi encounter danger, but they do not express any regrets. They have travelled a long way to see the precious child of promise, brought him gifts, and paid him homage, bowed down and worshipped him. Seeing him is worth whatever it costs for them, as it is for us.

During the years we were in Richmond, Virginia, a colleague from Liberia demonstrated this sacred truth. Emile, his wife, and their young daughter left Liberia on foot under the cover of darkness because the warlords at battle during this civil war were killing the pastors and imams who were working together for peace. He had barely escaped only to begin volunteering in our ministry in a nearby housing project, one of the most violent in Richmond, at a time when Richmond had the second-highest per capita murder rate in the country.

We worried that Emile might have survived civil war in Liberia only to be killed in our city, but how he lived wasn't up to us. And his calling to follow Jesus hadn't changed. Knowing the Christ and doing Christ's will was worth whatever risks were involved. Such is the case for all who have met Jesus and understand who we have met.

This is the message of Epiphany in all its wonder. It is worth reclaiming. It is a great raucous celebration! God's love is for everyone! This may startle people and bring on danger, but bring it on, this message is worth whatever it takes to embrace it!