

Sun, Moon, Stars, Light<sup>1</sup>  
Matthew 2.1-12  
Epiphany 1C  
January 6, 2019

They didn't quite know what they were looking for, but they knew it was something big. The star was bigger and brighter than the others, and it was steadily moving across the sky. They spent their evenings looking up, making notes on their charts, and tracking the changes and patterns they saw. No one was better at reading the skies, and no one more trusted. That's why they spent their mornings advising the powerful ruling class on possible outcomes their studies of the sun, moon, and stars implied. The advice ranged from best and worst time to make personal decisions to predictions of war and threats to the empire. The kings always tended to grab onto these advisors because their counsel came with a boost of confidence in a leadership governed by the heavens—as though to say the gods themselves smiled on the empire. After all, if the very stars themselves were for you, then who could be against you? The powerful ruling class was always keenly sensitive to such matters.

Shocked by what their notes indicated, the magi waited days before they collaborated on the report. They needed to be certain that this star really was moving. They consulted charts from previous years and couldn't find one that matched it anywhere, so not only was it moving but it was new. Given its size, pace, and placement, they came to the unanimous decision that something tremendous was taking place. Everything within their bodies vibrated with a knowing. Before they spoke the words to one another, each man knew that something was being ushered in that changed everything. Even the skies were marking the birth of this cosmic shift, and it was guiding them westward. Finally, they met to discuss their theories and all agreed on the only possible answer: a new king was being born, and this king would eventually replace one who had the answers they next sought.

A new king couldn't be born without the old king knowing, they reasoned, and so they set off with their charts and a bag of suitably royal gifts as they searched for the story the star was telling. Before long, their westward travels and frequent questions of local officials led them to King Herod. Surely King Herod already knew the baby because such an announcement was far too important to take place beyond his purview. Though not royals themselves, they remained confident in what they'd seen in the sky, and felt certain Herod would send them directly to wherever the new king was being

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<sup>1</sup> sections borrowed from "Shining Star, Descending Dove" preached by Rev. Lott, Jan. 8, 2016

born. It was their duty to welcome the birth of immense transformation, and naively they assumed no living ruler would deny them the honor of participating in such a welcome.

Word of their questions reached Herod's throne room before the magi did, and he was in an absolute panic. His own advisors had not warned him of any birth, and there was no one in his family giving birth to any royal babies. If the traveling stargazers were right, this birth was an end to his power and a threat to his existence. And so he called for them as he devised a plan for the child's destruction.

After meeting with King Herod, the magi were rather shocked that he didn't have much information to help them and agreed something seemed off about his detached awareness and chilly response. However, they were validated by their star charts when he sent them to Bethlehem, and that was enough encouragement to continue on in their search. Besides, they felt honored to be part of what was now a royal convoy on behalf of King Herod himself, bringing greetings to this newborn.

One night shortly after, the star changed its pattern. The path seemed to stop and hover over a spot in a way it hadn't before. There was a breath to it, a pulsing. The hovering felt like blessing and was as sure a sign as anything the men had ever seen in their lives. When they stopped in the place where it lingered, they were baffled. All they saw was a modest door on a very small home. The overwhelming joy they'd felt moments ago gave way to confusion and doubt. Had they traveled all the way for this? But they clung to the certainty they'd known even if they didn't feel it now, and they knocked on the simple, wooden door.

The men were utterly unprepared for what they found beyond it. A young couple of little means. A smiling baby dressed in clothes that were likely made by the mother who held him. There was nothing royal or powerful about these three, and yet...it was as though they could feel the star still hovering over that space, still pulsing its blessing of rightness. And in unison, as they inhaled and exhaled, the truth of what was happening overcame them. This was a birth even more extraordinary than they'd imagined. It sounded crazy to say it out loud, but they whispered together and agreed, somehow the strongest divine pulse of the entire universe was right there in that room and right there in that baby. They fumbled in their bags and offered the gifts they'd prepared, perhaps not as appropriate now that they knelt in the presence of something for which they simply did not have words to explain. Poets and artists would try to capture what they felt that night. Scholars would overanalyze and altogether miss its

essence.<sup>2</sup> The men knelt with a holy knowing that would guide them far away from Herod, all the way back home, and ultimately for the rest of their lives. You cannot kneel in the presence of that kind of holiness without remembering it forever in your bones—certain forever that an eternal peace was radiating into the world for all people across all time.

Dreams warned and guided them all, and the family hid in Egypt for years to avoid Herod's wrath. They finally returned home with their son, and he grew older and wiser in ways his parents didn't fully expect. Even with angels and promises directly from God, their human experiences simply limited their imaginations (as human experiences tend to do) and couldn't allow them to grasp the goodness God was plotting.

We rational, highly educated people want to make sense of all this with scholarship and academic interpretation. We want to add modern science, archeology, and historical analysis to the texts and explain away the mystery of them. But the invitation of Epiphany is to let go of all of that and release our need to be so literal with the texts before us. What is being described isn't rational. It isn't academic. The invitation is to pay attention to that hovering presence of light in our darkness and the ways it surprises us still. The invitation is to feel the power of that naming, knowing, seeing, creating, protecting, sending Light and welcome its guidance into our ordinary lives. The invitation is to feel the presence of that kind of holiness and eternal peace surrounding you and remember it forever in your bones. God is with us. God is guiding us. Us. All of us. Shepherds, royal astrologers, faith leaders, tax collectors—this story is for everyone who will hear it. God is moving and inviting and compelling us to wake up to our lives in ways we absolutely cannot imagine or articulate.

Alan Brehm puts it like this, "Though we really don't know much what to make of the season of Epiphany, in a very real sense, everything about our faith is a part of the celebration of Epiphany. Literally it means 'revealing,' it is a taking away of the veil that covers something. Epiphany is about unveiling what Advent promises: that 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (Lk. 3:6); that 'the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together' (Isaiah 40:5). During this time of year, we read stories from Jesus' life that show how Jesus revealed that he truly was the light that was coming into the darkness. That's why we celebrate Epiphany--it's a time to remind

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, p. 12 "Matthew's sublime story of the adoration of the Magi has often been better understood by poets and artists than by scholars, whose microscopic analysis has missed its essence."

ourselves that in him a light has dawned that will never go out--a light of faith, and hope, and joy that shines in all the kinds of darkness that can afflict this world."<sup>3</sup>

Here we are in a season (not just today but all the way through February) we know little about and typically overlook, and I invite you to join me in participating fully in an experience of sensing the presence we might know in our bones without words on our lips. Release cynicism and the compulsion to over-analyze; embrace mystery and wonder. The guiding force of God that shines in the sun, moon, and stars also vibrates like light within us, leading us forward before we know precisely where we are going or what will come next. Believe in this holy revealing today.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2013/01/light-in-darkness.html>