

Shining Star, Descending Dove  
Matthew 2.1-12 and 3.13-17  
Sunday, January 8, 2016  
First Sunday of Epiphany and the Baptism of Jesus  
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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 of possible outcomes based on their studies. 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. If the very stars themselves were for you, it seemed, then who could be against you? The powerful ruling class was always keenly sensitive to such matters.

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 happening to the west. Finally, they met to discuss their theories and all agreed: a new king was being born, and this king would eventually replace one who had the answers they 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 born. It was their duty to welcome the birth of immense transformation, and no king 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>1</sup> The men knelt with a holy knowing that would guide them far away from

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<sup>1</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."

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.

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 and couldn't allow them to grasp the goodness God was plotting.

The same was true for John. Intimately connected to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit, he knew that God was breaking into the world in a new way. He knew that people's loyalty to the structures and trappings of religious expression would limit their capacity to sense and welcome the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Everything within him vibrated with the truth that the scriptures were truer than he'd dared believed. The words of crooked being made straight and rough places being made plain were coming true, and he had to be part of that. He announced this good news to anyone who would listen, and he baptized as often as he preached. Be part of God's movement! Don't miss out on what is happening! Repent! Change your life! Turn it all around! Believe the good news of God! And folks lined up to let that very good news wash over them as they waited alongside John for the one who was coming to give flesh to the words of the prophets.

Then one day Jesus himself walked up, and John was thrown as he felt that familiar vibration throughout his body. Here was the one he'd been waiting for, but nothing was happening as he'd expected. Jesus stood in line with all of the others waiting for baptism. He spoke warmly and laughed with those who had come to hear John's teaching. This light seemed to pour out of his eyes and his smile, his face radiated as he listened to the men and women around him. He listened with such bright intensity and studied the faces of each person who approached him. In fact, the line was turning into more of a cluster as the warmth spread and the laughter grew around Jesus. John came out of the water and approached Jesus, pulling him aside from the others, questioning his request for baptism.

John was baffled by Jesus' request because the idea was so backwards. How could the one calling the whole world to follow in the Way of God's presence then turn and baptize the very One who was plotting that Way out for everyone? Surely Jesus had it backwards and had come to bless and baptize John, but Jesus insisted. John was on the right path but was underestimating his role in the Divine plan that was breaking out all around him. And so the two men quietly walked into the river, and John stared into

Jesus' warm face for quite awhile before he placed one hand on the small of Jesus' back and raised up one hand over him to offer the same blessing he offered all of the others. "Friend, believe the good news of God," he said before plunging Jesus beneath the water and bringing him up again to a new life that only God could design. And as Jesus pushed through the water to take a deep breath of that new life, that hovering presence returned—the one that pulses and creates, the one that breathes life into the world, the one that brings all things into being, the one that shines like light and guides star readers from the east to find a baby in the west—this time it was like a dove and hovered right over Jesus and spoke right into him of his goodness. Beloved. You are beloved. You are my son. I delight in you. I am well pleased." And those words poured into him and carried him through the wilderness, through teaching and healing, through character attacks and physical attacks, through building a community and releasing it to imperfectly grow in its divine-human dance. You cannot stand in those waters with the presence of that kind of holiness surrounding you without remembering it forever in your bones.

We rational, cerebral 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 and the myriad forms it takes. The invitation is to feel the power of that naming, knowing, seeing, creating, protecting, sending Spirit and welcome its guidance into our ordinary lives. The invitation is to feel the presence of that kind of holiness surrounding you and remember it forever in your bones. God is with us. God is guiding us. 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 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>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2013/01/light-in-darkness.html>

Here we are in a season 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. The guiding force of God that vibrates within us and leads us before we know precisely where we are going or what will come next.

It's what Jürgen Moltmann describes in his writing, "when the glory of God is revealed over all the earth, all humankind and all creation will be drawn into 'the life stream of the triune God,' where they experience 'boundless freedom, exuberant joy, and inexhaustible love,' which is what God intended for creation in the first place."<sup>3</sup>

Diana Butler Bass implores us to give ourselves to, "this multi-week time of reflection upon the Presence that enlightens the cosmos. Take time, friends. Consider this. Do not rush toward Lent. Instead, let the mystery of God with us transform you."

If the scholars miss the essence of these texts, then we are wise to hear the words of artist and poet Jan Richardson as she ably welcomes us and blesses us into this season with her words, *Blessing of the Magi*.

There is no reversing  
this road.  
The path that bore you here  
goes in one direction only,  
every step drawing you  
down a way  
by which you will not  
return.

You thought arrival  
was everything,  
that your entire journey  
ended with kneeling  
in the place  
you had spent all  
to find.

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Brehm footnote: See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 124, 126, 161, 178, 212, 222. Cf. also Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 183-84; Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End—The Beginning*, 145

When you laid down  
your gift,  
release came with such ease,  
your treasure tumbling  
from your hands  
in awe and  
benediction.

Now the knowledge  
of your leaving  
comes like a stone laid  
over your heart,  
the familiar path closed  
and not even the solace  
of a star  
to guide your way.

You will set out in fear  
you will set out in dream

but you will set out

by that other road  
that lies in shadow  
and in dark.

We cannot show you  
the route that will  
take you home;  
that way is yours  
and will be found  
in the walking.

But we tell you  
you will wonder  
at how the light you thought  
you had left behind  
goes with you,  
spilling from  
your empty hands,

shimmering beneath  
your homeward feet,  
illuminating the road  
with every step  
you take.