

## Second Sunday after Christmas - A (2026) The Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

OK, with a show of hands, who all have been cast in the annual Christmas pageant at one time or another in your lives? How about your children or grandchildren? When I was growing up in the Baptist church, we probably had 30-40 kids who made up the youth group. The standard practice was that the roles of Mary and Joseph were always assigned to the older kids. Honestly, I never wanted to be Joseph; he and Mary were first onto the set and then poor Joseph had to stand for the next 45 minutes looking longingly at the plastic baby that was the fill-in for Jesus. Occasionally, one of the new mothers of the congregation would allow her newborn child to be used for the baby Jesus character with everyone hoping there would not be a prolonged crying binge during the pageant. We even hung a large translucent star from the ceiling of the nave which when turned on would shine directly onto the holy family in the sanctuary as the wise men made their way up the aisle.

Nope, I never aspired to be the Joseph character; I always wanted to be one of the wise men. In part, I loved the costumes we got to wear and, being a bit of a ham, the spotlight that introduced us as we entered to the strains of “We Three Kings,” and that each one of us kings had the opportunity to sing one of the verses to the hymn upon our entrance. I loved that the characters were called “Magi,” a very exotic description. I am far removed from the pageants of my youth, but the memories are still rather fresh.

In today's reading from Matthew, we celebrate the Feast of The Epiphany, which is technically observed on the church calendar this coming Tuesday, January 6th. Today we find the Magi having arrived from their mysterious starting point 'in the east,' having traveled for up to two years on this journey of homage and worship. Our creche scene is finally complete. Notwithstanding the proper chronology of events, all the characters are in their proper place. The significance of the arrival of these mysterious men and their entourage is particularly striking concerning the other main character in this story, the paranoid King Herod. I think we have something to learn from all these characters.

The stories and interpretations surrounding these mysterious men abound throughout history. Some historians suggest they came from Persia while others think either Babylonia, Sheba, or Midian. Matthew tells us that they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and scholars have opined that this would indicate that they were gentlemen of great wealth. Some writers have suggested that they were experts in the field of astronomy. Still others suggest that they were of different nationalities and ethnicities, reflecting the image that they represented all the non-Jewish world, aka, Gentiles. In seminary, we read material that indicated they may have been a part of royal dynasties. Mysterious men from the east, indeed.

Nonetheless, they play an integral part in the nativity story: individuals who *saw* a unique sign in the heavens and *responded* to its calling by *seeking*, through a long and arduous journey, its meaning and implications. Seeking and longing helped characterize these Magi as they were committed to learning the truth about what this amazing star was pointing out.

In addition, Matthew tells us that these intrepid seekers, upon the star stopping over the place where the child was, "were overwhelmed with joy." The English Standard Version translation offers "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." These 'wise men' were filled with wonder and longing, all wrapped in exceedingly great joy. Seeking. Finding. Paying homage. These mysterious men from the East had found what they were looking for.

Let's juxtapose the Magi's story with that of Herod. Upon hearing that the Magi were searching for a newborn "king of the Jews," Herod responds with fear and Matthew's account says that all of Jerusalem was also frightened. To be clear, Matthew speaks of 'all of Jerusalem' to mean those in positions of religious or secular power. 'King of the Jews' was Herod's title, and any suggestion that there might be a competitor to his throne made everyone in authority uneasy. While Judea was still an independent kingdom, the Roman Empire heavily influenced it, and it was through this authority that Herod had become ruler. Herod was fearful that this newborn, prophesied in scripture, might very well be his successor to the throne.

Herod's profile is rife with self-preservation, fear, and a desire for the status quo. His life is filled with brilliance (the vision and intellect to complete massive building projects such as the Jerusalem temple and the fortress at Masada) and paranoia (as evidenced by his murdering of his wife, several sons, and other relatives, let alone the slaughtering of infant males 2 years old and younger that we know as the Feast of the Holy Innocents). Herod surrounded himself with what was comfortable because he could control it. The status quo was his security blanket.

Matthew's account leaves us with two different responses to an encounter with the divine. The wise men and their entourage seek this encounter out; Herod stays in hiding. The Magi are filled with exceeding joy. Herod is filled with fear and paranoia. The Magi explore and expose themselves to the rigors of travel and wonder where science, nature, and scripture come together over a house in the village of Bethlehem. In contrast, Herod is quite content to keep things as they are.

An encounter with the living God awaits us and all of humanity every day. We all have the option to choose to follow the star that leads to this divine life or act as if it doesn't exist and stay on our current path. This amazing star, a heavenly sign available for all to see, was followed by some and not by others. This star experience still exists today. Some choose to journey along the path that leads not just to a manger in Bethlehem, but to a cross on Calvary. Others decide that the journey is too long, too hard, or of no value. The Magi of yesteryear and those of today long for an encounter that fills them with exceeding joy, endless hope, and a

life of meaning and purpose. The Herods of this current age characterized by narcissism, greed, power, and filled with pride, miss the star, and the opportunity for a transformed life are left behind.

All epiphanies reveal or enlighten us. But not all epiphanies arrive ‘complete surprises.’ As the Magi attest, their sense of being called by this mysterious star puts them on a journey, a pilgrimage. The experience upon arriving certainly qualified as ‘an epiphany,’ but the process was much longer. So too for us. The divine presence is all around, just like the star over Bethlehem. Some see it and respond, others don’t even notice; it’s just another big ball of gas. But when we do see it and respond, epiphanies await.

Dear friends, may we continue to follow the star that first led us to the manger to new and exciting encounters with God. May those still seeking find this place to be one filled with God’s presence and encouragement for them to continue their journey with us. May those who have traveled long and hard roads, who have been faithful in their quest, find among us a people who will share our experiences of these encounters that help lead them to that perfect light. Like the Magi, may our response to the epiphany of the divine bring us to our knees in humble adoration and fill us with exceedingly great joy.