

THE OLD MEETING HOUSE
East Montpelier Center, Vermont

“Light of the Wor(l)d”

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Preached by the Rev. Elissa Johnk

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Prayer for Wholeness

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always
though I may seem lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* page 83, © 1988 Merton Legacy Trust

It was common, in the ancient middle east, for important figures to be born under a special sign. Rulers and heroes were said to be born under a special star – a sign from the very cosmos that this person was to be important, that the world was to sit up, pay attention. When the author of the gospel of Matthew was writing – attempting to reconcile his belief in Jesus as the Messiah with the world’s denial of him – it would have been very important for this detail to be included. It was important not because people would have needed the star to have faith in Jesus, but because without this detail, the story would be unrecognizable. It would be like trying to tell the story of Cinderella, or Hercules, or Harry Potter, without telling the part of the humble beginnings.

Biblical literalists and apologists have spent many, many years and a lot of ink describing the different astronomical phenomena that could explain the mysterious star. And that’s all well and good. Indeed, there have been several different, equally plausible explanations put forth – there was a comet during that time, or a planetary system that would have been abnormally bright. So, in fact, perhaps there were SEVERAL stars for the magi to follow. But the point of saying that at Jesus’ birth there was a star in the sky that was so bright, so unmistakable, that the whole world fell silent is not whether or not it is true. It is true in this sense: something fundamentally changed about the world when Jesus was born. The way we mark time changed when Jesus was born. The story of your life, today, changed the moment Jesus was born.

In the still and the quiet, nestled into scratchy hay under a starry sky.

Epiphany – literally meaning “manifestation” or “appearance” – is the celebration of light. It is the celebration of the appearance of the star. It is the celebration of the appearance of the Magi. It is the celebration of the appearance of Jesus to the wider world. But more than that, it is the celebration of our own appearance – the day we mark our *own* arrival at the manger. We have had several days of Christmas, now. We have sung our carols, opened our gifts. And now we are left here – in the aftermath – faced with the challenge of a new year. No fancy toys. No big meals. Just us, and the stillness of the days and nights in front of us.

Will this newness simply be the turn of a calendar page? Or will we look up, and see the sign that the cosmos is giving us – the bright, starry sky, that is telling us that the world is not as it always has been, telling us that something new can happen, something new can be born – not up above, not within some supernatural realm, but within *us*. Down here, in the mud and the muck and the scratchy hay of life.

That, to me, is the miracle of epiphany. This wise light from up above – from something greater than us, greater than our understanding – that shines down on our insular little worlds. This wise light that shines into our darkness, and enables us to see farther than we could before. That opens up our sphere of vision, helps us to see the world around us differently. That coworker who has been harassing you? A little more light, just a little more light, and you see the pain on her face from watching her mother struggle with cancer. That fight you can’t stop having with your partner? A little more light, and you see that you are arguing not about the money, or the furniture, or the kids, but with the ghosts of lives past – theirs and yours. That aching space inside of you from a lost love? O God, just a little more light, and you see the ways that ache is opening you, shaping you for the present, for the future.

It is tempting to dismiss the wise men as fictional. To say that of course they were able to bring their gifts, to travel hundreds of miles, to recognize what was in front of them because they had this light – this amazing light shining in front of them. They had this knowledge of history, of the world, that told them what the signs would be and where to look. Clearly that is not reality, right?

But if we do that, we are missing Matthew’s point.

What do you think this is: *In the beginning was the word. And the people who had been in darkness saw a great light.*

What changed the world that day was not a star in the sky, but a baby. From the very first time people gathered around him, from the very first time they began to gather to tell themselves the story of Jesus, they equated those stories – those words – as the very light of life – the light to life. That depression you just can’t shake? A little more light – a word of hope that pushes toward something more. Anger problems? A little more light – hear again the words of Paul, persecutor of the church, “*the mystery was made known to me by revelation,*” by appearance, “*Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace.*” A little more light, and we see that anger, that transformation, as the very light of hope, of change, of newness and possibility for all the world.

Brothers and sisters. We *do* have a light. We *do* have a star, shining down on us for us to follow. It is, like it was for the magi, the light of history, of experience, telling us that in this word, in this baby, in us, is the possibility of wholeness.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about the magi is not the gifts they bring, but their willingness to follow. They knew not where they were going, or what they would find when they got there. Gold, frankincense, I’m sure they didn’t think they’d end up in a stable. But they went. And they allowed themselves to be changed by what they found.

So today, on our celebration of epiphany, as we stand in face of the newness of the days and nights that stretch unused in front of us, I am going to ask you – challenge all of us – to do the same thing: to open yourselves to the possibility that maybe, just maybe, there is something in this light, in this word, in this star, in this story, for you.

At the front of the chancel here, you will find stars. A lot of them. On the back are written words or biblical phrases. In the next few moments of silence, come to the front, look at the stars, find the one you are drawn to. Don't look at the back, just pick out the star that speaks to you – not the one you *want* to speak to you! Take it back to your seat and read what it says. And then hang on to it. Meditate on it in the silence. And then, let the word or phrase guide you this year. What does the word have to say to you? How does the word shape your year? As you enter into this new year, I would hope that you would, like the magi of old, open yourself to this star – this manifestation, revelation, appearance. Let it change you.

Put it in a special place when you get home. If you're like me, that means taking a picture of it on your phone and carrying it around with you. And next year, on this day, we will look again at this scripture, at these wise men of old, and we will discuss together the ways in which this word or phrase was a light to you this year. Did it help you see? What did it help you see?

Like all the generations before us, and all those to come, we have been given the chance to observe the star at its rising, to follow it here, to the manger. Let us now let it, like the wise men, help us to leave for the new year by another road.