

Isaiah 60:1-6 ~ Matthew 2:1-12

Seeing the Star

Epiphany of the Lord ~ January 3, 2021 ~ Communion Meditation

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Introduction to Scripture:

“I’m going to marry Mary! I’m going to marry Mary. And we are going to have a baby and name him Jesus... I’ve got to pack.” That was the wake-up call to beat all wake-up calls, spoken by Joseph (played expertly by Oliver Johnson) in our children’s Christmas play, “Do Not Be Afraid.” As rendered in The Message Bible, “Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God’s angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary... He named the baby Jesus.” (Matthew 1:24-25). Today’s scripture is what comes next and it is only found in Matthew. Joseph has exited stage left (maybe to get diapers or to go back to work, since the text suggests that some time has elapsed since the birth).

Today’s story, our traditional Epiphany gospel story, involves no one from central casting. What I mean is: you will not see any Jewish men, no patriarchs or prophets (in the traditional sense) on stage. Instead, we have the very poor, very young, unknown Mary from small two-bit town Nazareth, and some Gentiles, some non-Jews, non-local, somewhat “strange” foreigners from the East. Matthew chooses to withhold what we might think of as basic facts: how many men, or what their names were. Nor does he give them any lines to say when they finally reach Mary and Jesus. Can you imagine what their conversation might have entailed? Picture Mary with her child Jesus, and her exotic guests with their very strange gifts for a young child?

Matthew *does* give these “wise guys” words that totally infuriate and intimidate the one who thinks he is in complete control: King Herod. A King whose reign of tyranny and exploitation that cast a dark shadow on this whole story would be called a police state in our time. “Oh no, did you say, ‘King of the Jews?’ There can’t be two Kings in one empire.” In our Epiphany story Matthew pushes us from the birth narratives on—to face the political consequences of Jesus’ kingdom of Love on earth. Even from the manger, along with that most beautiful sound—the cry of a brand new life, the sound we all hold our breath to hear at the birth of every child; with baby Jesus’ cry, Matthew forces us to anticipate the consequence of Divine sacrificial love for all creation: Jesus’ cry of abandonment and death on the cross.

But Matthew doesn’t leave us there. In our Epiphany story, we are given a blaze of hope at the end. The magi heed the warning in their dream to double-cross Herod and go home by a different road, avoiding the command of King Herod. What about you and I? What new road, what different course of action might God be calling us to this year? How might we, as a people like Isaiah’s Zion in the aftermath of the Babylonian Exile, rise up and shine with Christ’s healing light in our broken places laid bare. You could call them the *unsettling* epiphanies of 2020 of our nation revealed by the pandemic, our racial reckoning, and the presidential election.

Communion Meditation:

You never know what you are missing, if you forget to look up. That is just happened to me when we were having our New Year's Eve Senior High Zoom Ice Cream Treats get together. I was looking down writing notes of the gratitude prayers each of them was naming out loud. It was a great list: it included grateful for not being sick with COVID, for 2020 being about over, for their families, for the vaccine coming out, for a walk with their mom, and for our church family—were the ones I wrote down. When I did look up, one zoom square that had included two brothers, was blank—no smiling faces, just the bottom of one foot. Well one brother had messed with the other, with one crashing to the floor. Everyone was laughing (quietly since we were supposed to be praying) and I missed the whole thing! Which I'm sure made it even funnier for all of them. Fortunately, Carmen clued me into what I missed after the Zoom meeting ended.

A frivolous but fun instance of failing to look up. But imagine if those magi or scholars or wisemen from the East had failed to look up and notice a strange star in the sky. Thanks be to God that they did. And thanks be to God that we are here today. We all hope that things are "looking up" now that 2020 is in our rearview mirror. As one near and dear videographer adroitly put it on Jan 1, 2021: "hindsight is 2020." But my sincere and serious challenge to each of us here in 2021, is to look up. Let this be a year where we start and end our day by looking up. The "Chalking the Door" that we did at Discovery Time, could serve as a visual reminder for you at your home.

Why is looking up important? When we look up, we see beyond our limited perspective. When we look up, we see a sky and stars, the sun and the moon, that sustain life for us all. We can see a cosmos that is not divided by partisan politics, or by nation, creed or culture. When we look up, lift up our noses out of our own little ruts, we open ourselves to see and hear the voices that can save us. We will start to see God's vision: An alignment of stars where human peace and understanding burst every boundary that we try to construct and control. And those whom we may see as "on the margin" hold wisdom, off the perspective which we need to hear.

"Follow the drinking gourd." That was the code word for the Big Dipper coined by slaves who would use the North Star, located by starting with the scooper part of the Big Dipper, to know which way to run toward freedom. Harriet Tubman used the night sky to make 19 separate trips guiding family and friends along the treacherous path to freedom from slavery, from 1849-1865. Harriet knew to look up and trust the star. What star do you follow? What stars will chart your course in 2021?

We have learned and unlearned a great deal this past year we are eager to put behind us. One thing I have learned in a new way is that we have an amazing community that is resilient, ready to pivot wherever the Star points in the name of caring for the least of these. Being a Matthew 25 church, depends on just that: our ability to see Christ in the broken places of our community. Remember the question that is asked again and again in Matthew 25:31-46? "Lord, when did we *see* you hungry, thirsty, a stranger?" We have to look up to see Christ in the other.

Although Matthew gave the magi who followed the Bethlehem star no words, Dorothy Sayers in 1943, in her play, "The Man Born to Be King," gave us the gift of imagined dialogue, of what conversation might have taken place when the three wisemen, whom tradition has named, Caspar, Melchior & Balthazar, arrived at the house where Mary and her young child Jesus were. She titled this scene, "When the Promised Kingdom Comes." And now we are offering it to you. (Warning: you may recognize the actors playing the parts of Mary and the three wise guys.)

When the Promised Kingdom Comes

By Dorothy Sayers, from *The Man Born to Be King*¹

Mary:

God bless you, wise old man; and you, tall warrior; and you, dark traveler from desert lands. You come in a strange way, and with a strange message. But that God sent you I am sure, for you and his angels speak with one voice.

"King of the Jews"—why, yet; they told me my son should be the Messiah of Israel. "King of the World"—that is a very great title; yet when he was born, they proclaimed tidings of joy to all nations. "King of Heaven"—I don't quite understand that; and yet indeed they said that he should be called the Son of God. You are great and learned men, and I am a very simple woman. What can I say to you, till the time comes when my son can answer for himself?

Caspar:

Alas! The more we know, the less we understand life. Doubts make us afraid to act, and much learning dries the heart. And the riddle that torments the world is this: Shall Wisdom and Love live together at last, when the promised kingdom comes?

Melchior:

We are rulers, and we see that what men need most is good government, with freedom and order. But orders put fetters on freedom, and freedom rebels against order, so that love and power are always at war together. And the riddle that torments the world is this: Shall Power and Love dwell together at last when the promised kingdom comes?

Balthazar:

I speak for sorrowful people—for the ignorant and the poor. We rise up to labor and lie down to sleep, and night is only a pause between one burden and another. Fear is our daily companion—the fear of want, the fear of war, the fear of cruel death, and of still more cruel life. But all this we could bear if we knew that we did not suffer in vain; that God was beside us in the struggle, sharing the miseries of his own world. For the riddle that torments the world is this: Shall Sorrow and Love be reconciled at last, when the promised kingdom comes?

Mary:

These are very difficult questions—but with me, you see, it is like this. When the Angel's message came to me, the Lord put a song into my heart. I suddenly saw that wealth and cleverness were nothing to God—no one is too unimportant to be his friend. That was the thought that came to me, because of the things that happened to me. I am quite humbly born, yet the power of God

came upon me; very foolish and unlearned, yet the Word of God was spoken to me; and I was in deep distress, when my Baby was born and filled my life with love. So I know very well that Wisdom and Power and Sorrow can live together with Love; and for me, the Child in my arms is the answer to all riddles.

How will you look up, listen to others, stay open to the Spirit, and pitch in? Here at this first communion of 2021, I hear an invitation to a reset. A refocus. At this Table is the answer to all the riddles. It is so small, quiet, humble. A crust of bread, a drop of wine too small to gulp. Yet Christ has set this Table to nourish and to shape us. To give us new eyes. To help us show up at the right place at the right time. Our world is in desperate need of healers and peacemakers, channels of God's grace by any name.ⁱⁱ Taste the star in the bread, drink in the light, then rise up: for your light has come!

ⁱ Dorothy Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King*, (1943, repr., San Francisco Ignatius, 1990), 49; reprinted in *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year B. Volume 1, editors, Green, Long, Powery, Rigby, Sharp, p.165.

ⁱⁱ From Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation, (cac.org) Daily meditations, 12.30.20 & 1.2.21