

KINGDOM EPIPHANIES

Entering Epiphany

January 2, 2022



Prelude: "Trust in You," Bradford

Welcome/Announcements

CTW | Psalm 72:1-7, 16-17

Give the gift of wise rule to the king, O God,
the gift of just rule to the crown prince.
May he judge your people rightly,
be honorable to your meek and lowly.
Let the mountains give exuberant witness;
shape the hills with the contours of right living.
Please stand up for the poor,
help the children of the needy,
come down hard on the cruel tyrants.
Outlast the sun, outlive the moon—
age after age after age.
Be rainfall on cut grass,
earth-refreshing rain showers.
Let righteousness burst into blossom
and peace abound until the moon fades to nothing.

May he never be forgotten,
his fame shine on like sunshine.
May all godless people enter his circle of blessing
and bless the One who blessed them.

"Open the Eyes of My Heart," Smith

- Dismiss Kids

"My Savior Left His Throne Above," Hicks

PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 2:1-4, 9-11, 13-14, 16, 19-21

READER #1

Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold wise men, magi from the east came to Jerusalem saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose in the east and have come to worship him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

After listening to Herod the king, the magi went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose in the east went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

READER #2

Now when the wise men had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' And Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt.

Then Herod...became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all the region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

But when Herod died, behold an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.' And Joseph rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

SERMON | The Cycle of Light

Now, it wouldn't surprise me if you wondered why our scripture this morning is a "Christmas Story" and why our Christmas decorations are still up. I mean, come on, Christmas day was over a week ago. It is time to pack up the decorations, put out the candles, and start the count down to next year's celebration. Right? I mean, the only reason Christmas stuff stays up this long is that we are too "busy" to put it up, or you just don't want the festivity of the season to end!

While it is true that we've had plenty of distractions keeping us from cleaning up, and we very much want the Christmas spirit to last as long as possible, the reason for the extended décor and lighted wreath is because we are still technically in the "Christmas Season." At least according to many Jesus followers' traditions.

Now, prior to the 25th, we joined with our sisters and brothers in Jesus worldwide through the season of Advent, which led us up to Christmas' eve. But, did you know the Christmas season is actually the twelve days after the famous day itself? In some circles, Christmas does not end on the 25th of December but begins that day, and runs through the 6th of January. This extended season has become known as *The 12 days of Christmas*. That's right, *the 12 Days of Christmas* are not before Christmas, leading us to the birth of Christ, as Advent does. But instead, they are a celebration of the gift that arrived that first Noel which grows in depth and width as we meditate on the wonder of the marvelous arrival of God with us, Emmanuel!

So, the "Christmas" calendar in church traditions around the world and throughout the last thousand-plus-years flows like this:

The "Christmas" Calendar

· **ADVENT** | 4th Sunday before to Christmas Eve

· **CHRISTMAS DAY**

· **CHRISTMAS SEASON** | Dec. 26th - Jan. 6th

· **EPIPHANYTIDE** | Jan. 6th - Feb. 2nd or until Ash Wednesday

"If Advent is a season of waiting," of anticipating and inviting, desiring and beseeching, "Christmas is a season of wonder."¹ Wonder, amazement, and awe at John's description of what became real that first Noel,

"the Word" who was "In the beginning," and "was God" and in whom "was life, and the life was the light of men. The light," that "shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it," has "become flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1, 4-5, 14)

Christmas may peak on the 25th, yet the world-changing event demands continued amazement at what happened that one incomprehensible day when the Word became flesh, and thus the Christmas Season. In the *12 Days of Christmas*, with each day of contemplation and wonder, the gift of Christ's arrival from our true love grows and grows from a single bird's beautiful song to a drumline's chorus setting the beat for the entire

¹ Bobby Gross, *Living the Christian Year: time to inhabit the story of God*, 64.

world. Or, as the psalmist proclaimed, the “mountains giving exuberant witness;” and “the hills” shaped “with the contours of right living” under his rule and within his kingdom.

THE CYCLE OF LIGHT

- Advent
- Christmas Season
- Epiphanytide

It's this growing declaration of Jesus' arrival that leads the Christmas Season to its concluding with the Feast of Epiphany—of Revelation! Having joyfully celebrated the amazing wonder of the coming light of life into the world, the season of Epiphany or Epiphanytide, which flows out of Advent and Christmas, across various traditions focuses on the appearing or revealing of Jesus' identity and purpose. Epiphany is a time of increase, growing visibility and tangibility of what one author notes as the “manifestation [of] what has been largely hidden...made more widely known.”²

And so, we move from anticipation to wonder to revelatory display, completing what many church traditions call the “Cycle of Light.” Depending on the tradition, three events are associated with the beginning of this final season of the cycle which we are about to enter:

The "Events" of Epiphany

- Jesus' Baptism
- Wedding at Cana
- The visitation of the wise men

The baptism of Jesus and the voice that *reveals* him as the beloved Son

The turning of water into wine, which is Jesus' first miracle, *revealing* his power and purpose

The visit of the Magi from the East, a star's light *revealing* and guiding Gentiles to the king of the world

Advent is a season of anticipation, Christmas is a season of wonder, and Epiphany(tide) is “a season of enlightenment,”³ set alight by the feast of Epiphany, also called “Three Kings' Day.” Which brings us to our story today, for Epiphany is commonly associated with [Matthew 2:1-12](#), which tells the story of the visitation of the Magi (or “wise men”), who were Gentiles, outsiders like us to the bloodline of Israel.

The Church has long viewed the Magi finding Jesus (thanks to the leading light of a star) as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 60:1–3, particularly verse 3, which reads,

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;

² Gross, 83.

³ Ibid.

*but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

Now, the image of these travelers from afar, which fills our songs and nativity scenes, is a bit misleading. Nowhere in the story is there a mention of “three kings” or even “three” wise men. This number of the worshiping wisdom seekers came in the third-century from the theologian Origen, who presumably spoke of three Magi because three types of gifts were given to Jesus and his family. The idea that these Magi or “wise men” were kings didn’t develop until about three hundred years later in the sixth-century, the same period where they received their names: Gaspar, Melchoir, and Balthasar.

In truth, we do not know how many magi traveled to Bethlehem, but we do know that their trip was long and costly and would have only been set out upon from a deep desire to find that which they were seeking. We know this in part because they did not arrive on the night of Jesus’ birth. Herod’s atrocity of slaying innocents under two years of age and younger is revealing in a multitude of ways. For one, it tells us that the magi arrived somewhere in the time frame of a few months to a year or so after the birth of Jesus—assuming Herod would have overestimated the age of the Christ child just to make sure he didn’t miss his successor.

So the magis’ visit probably does not look like any of the nativity scenes we may or may not still have up around the house! Regardless of how you imagine the story unfolding or how we’ve filled in, and created, the holes in the story, what we do know is that the first inclusion of the feast of Epiphany or “the feast of Three Holy Kings” appeared in the Egyptian city Alexandria in the early third-century.

According to Bobby Gross, “Some scholars postulate that the celebration was inaugurated to counter the Egyptian festival for the birthday of Aion, god of time, which included a ceremonial drawing of water from the Nile [, and the] legends [which] speak of springs whose water turned into wine. So perhaps Alexandrian Christians wanted to proclaim Christ’s baptism, in which the water is made sacred by [Jesus’] presence...and his miracle of Cana, in which [Jesus] transforms water to wine by his own power.”⁴

The season we enter was birthed out of a desire to enlighten, to reveal who Jesus is and the kingdom he came to establish, often in contrast to the recognized powers and structures of the day. **This desire for enlightenment, for seeing Jesus and his kingdom as grace and truth, sets the tone for the season of Epiphany.** A season that, at least in Protestant traditions, focuses on the manifestation of the light of life *and* the role of those whom the Light of Life said,

“You are the light of the world...let your light shine...” (Matthew 5:14, 16).

Which again returns us to our story today. These magi were men of wisdom who were searching for understanding and knowledge. Coming from afar, they followed the light of the Christmas Star (much like the

⁴ Gross, 84-85.

one we got to see last year!), which led them to Jesus. They sought after and **followed the Light and revealed the Light** amongst and yet missed by the locals of Jesus' time.

"When Herod the king heard [who the magi were looking for and why] he was troubled and all of Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born." (Matthew 2:3-4)

These outsiders were searching, led by the light, while the insiders were blinded to the light amongst them. And while we might suspect that finding a young child as the foretold wisdom of the world would, especially after such a costly and calculated search, compel laughter, doubt, or cynicism, these wise men worshiped. They demonstrated in their humble generosity before a humble King, what our scriptures call the "Fear-of-God"—that awe and wonder at the presence of God with us, for us, in us that the Christmas Season leads us to ponder. A wonder and awe, which the proverbs say is the reward of such a passionate and dedicated search for wisdom.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge..." (Proverbs 1:7)

Epiphanytide or the "Season after Epiphany," after the revelation of our Savior, is a time to recall and reflect the good news of God with us, for us, and in us as the Light of Life—as wisdom, understanding, and knowledge of life to its fullest—for all peoples. It is a time when the Church focuses on the enlightening or manifesting nature of Jesus and his kingdom. **And a time to consider our part in the mission.** A time to find our place in salvation's story still unfolding as we reflect Jesus' light—his wisdom, understanding, and knowledge of God and his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. It is a season to celebrate what we have received and invite others to receive with us the great gift of God's grace in the revealing of healing truth and wisdom to the world.

The wise men lead the way to the day of Epiphany through searching and humility, through generosity and worship even in an unexpected discovery of a peasant child as *the* king. It is the wisdom of the Christ manifest in the ordinary, earthy, humanity of Jesus: his life, actions, teachings, death, resurrection, and ascension—that sets the path forward and compels the invitation of many faith families from Epiphany's feast to the feast of presentation on February 2nd or others to Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent. As Paul put it,

This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the **appearing [epiphany] of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (2 Timothy 1:9-10)**

While our faith family does not strictly follow any particular "church calendar," we have, over the last few years, made it a habit to begin each year, setting our attention on *Kingdom Epiphanies*. Starting each new year by contemplating and responding to the stories Jesus tells to help us experience an epiphany of our own and,

⁵ the feast of the **Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ** [at the Temple] (AKA *Candlemas*) on **February 2** (40 days after Christmas, when, according to Leviticus 12:1–8, Mary would have to be ritually purified after childbirth).

by his Spirit, encourage epiphanies in those around us! Stories that reveal, enlightening us to the manifestation of the reality of God with us, God for us, God in us, his kingdom, God ruling and reigning to bring about his good purposes in and through us within the world as the light pushes out the darkness.

A time, in the words of the psalmist, to reflect and respond to the grace and truth that,

Give the gift of wise rule to the king, O God,
the gift of just rule to the crown prince.
May he judge your people rightly,
be honorable to your meek and lowly.
Let the mountains give exuberant witness;
shape the hills with the contours of right living.
Please stand up for the poor,
help the children of the needy,
come down hard on the cruel tyrants.
Outlast the sun, outlive the moon—
age after age after age.
Be rainfall on cut grass,
earth-refreshing rain showers.

May all godless people enter his circle of blessing
and bless the One who blessed them.
(Psalm 72:1-6, 17)

PARABLES | In Epiphanytide

Now, let me say this briefly, the stories Jesus tells have a more common name: *parable*. Parables, contends Klyne Snodgrass, “**are stories with intent**, analogies through which one is enabled to see truth [enlightened]...Parables are much more than illustration [about heaven]...[and though often prefaced with “The kingdom of God is like...], they are not about heaven [in some distant or ethereal way]. They are [instead] directed to life on this earth.”⁶ Snodgrass argues that “The immediate aim of a parable is to be compellingly interesting, and in being interesting, it diverts attention and disarms. A parable’s ultimate aim is to awaken insight, stimulate the conscience, **and** move to act[ion]...Like prophets before him, Jesus told parables to prompt thinking and *stimulate response* in relation to God,”⁷ one another, and the day-to-day lives we inhabit.

As we enter Epiphanytide in our unique way, we will look at four particular parables. Four *stories with intent* that will, by God’s grace, help us live with intentionality in 2022.

⁶ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: a comprehensive guide to the parables of Jesus*, 7-8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

- The Parable of the Two Sons
- The Parable of the Laborers
- The Parable of the Dishonest Manager
- The Parable of the Talents

We'll immerse ourselves in Jesus' stories with the expectation that the parable will reveal more and more the true nature of God with us, God for us, God in us; and, what our response and role to our Father's kingdom come and will be done in Dallas, in and through our lives is meant to look.

On the website and in the app, you can find a resource to help you engage with these stories of intent throughout the week between Sundays. Questions and instructions to help you meditate and discuss, engage with God yourself *and* with your GC or DNA.

But before we get to the parables, to the kingdom Epiphanies, we have to make our way through the rest of the Christmas story. A story in Matthew's gospel that has little of the sentimentality and polish of our cultural and commercialized decorations.

THE REST OF THE STORY | Jesus' Flight & Return (Darkness & Light)

In Matthew's gospel account, the Christmas story does not end with the village singing together arm-in-arm or family and friends reunited under the decorated tree and wishes fulfilled. Instead, it ends with fleeing for life, a massacre of children, and returning in trepidation to the place of God's intention.

It's not the story we expect or easily marketed, but it is a true story. A story that tells the truth of the reality of this world where tyrants seem to be in charge, and those who have would rather destroy the most vulnerable and indefensible rather than risk losing what they possess, *and yet*, whose days and dominion do not last. It tells the truth of reality, that darkness opposes light, that the world we inhabit is not neutral. Nevertheless, as John the apostle said it,

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5)

The story of God with us, God for us, God in us; of the kingdom of heaven, begins on earth, the same ground on which we work, marry, play, pray, sin, and find forgiveness even today. A world where power (in people and forces) is inclined to oppress—whether politically, militarily, or economically. A world in which those who have (including you and me) would rather destroy to defend whatever little or much we have rather than risk loss. A world in which the ways that seem right lead not to life in abundance but death, and yet they do not last forever. Rather, as the true Christmas Story reveals, they are exposed by the light and ultimately die off while the Son blazes on.

Here, in the words of Malcolm Guite, is what this often overlooked part of the Christmas Story, a part we are meant to contemplate and wonder about as much as any other part for what it reveals about Jesus' arrival.

REFUGE | Malcolm Guite

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on the road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
**But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.**

Perhaps the most “profound and paradoxical image in the whole” of the Christmas Story is the ironic revelation of Jesus by those seemingly far off from the story of faith, followed immediately by the destructive response of ones who were near to the history and the person. “We should never cease to be astonished by” the image that seems so counter to our vision of the Christmas child, the King of kings, the Lord of lords arrival. The truth of this story means that we have One who not only entered our bruised and bloodied world—the real world—but was himself bruised and bloodied, an innocent Lamb slain, like “those children of Bethlehem [and all the region] who died for Jesus’ name without ever knowing him.”⁸ Who find, with those who weep for their loss, the One who wipes away every tear (Rev. 7:17) because he has shared them and taken them upon himself.

⁸ Malcolm Guite, *Waiting on the Word: a poem a day for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany*, 116.

REFLECTION | Entering Epiphany

We'd enter a new year poorly if we did not stop for a moment and ponder the Christmas Story in whole. Yet there is one particular part of the Magi's story that, when I am still long enough to do so, always convicts me.

It's the part where the wise men pointed out what the Jewish people had missed, the return of their long-awaited and true king, the kingdom of God there amongst them, and instead of being greatly relieved or excited or in awe; they are "troubled" (Matthew 2:3).

"When Herod the king heard [who the magi were looking for and why] he was troubled and all of Jerusalem with him;" (Matthew 2:3)

The word "troubled" depicts something being agitated, shaken back and forth even though it was meant to remain still or at ease. It is a word that describes getting too stirred up inside, an inward commotion that removes the calmness of mind, disturbs equanimity, disquiets the soul: the very opposite of what we think of—and try and practice—in our life with Jesus together.

The convicting part is that it is not just "Herod the king" who was disturbed, unsettled by the king and kingdom coming, but "all Jerusalem with him." It was apparent what Herod would lose if his visible kingdom switched over to the domain of another. But what about the people of Jerusalem, many of which were long awaiting the Messiah? **What would agitate them about God's arrival and God's rule at their moment in history?**

If I am honest, at times God with me, God for me, God in me; God ruling and reigning in the most unexpected means and places; troubles me too. There is, if I am honest, a fear not of God, not a fear that is awe and wonder at something more significant and magnificent and somewhat mysterious that I inhabit and inhabits me, but instead it is a fear of losing what I think is mine or what I want or what I imagine life to be that disquiets me. In truth, it is a fear that questions if the king and his kingdom really are better and best.

I wonder if the same is true for anyone else? Our Christian and even cultural Christmas is exciting. It stirs up all kinds of positive emotions and images in its polish and pomp, much of which is excellent and encouraging. But not if we don't read the rest of the story. **Christmas comes and goes and changes nothing unless the story of light's arrival continues into the darkness around us and within us that is seeking out the light, not to worship like the magi but to snuff it out.** The good news is, *every Herod dies*, including the one in you and I.

For a few moments, as we move from Christmas and enter Epiphany, as we leave one year and enter a new; let us consider the two movements:

TWO MOVEMENTS

1. Wonder to Manifestation | Asking for increasing sight *and* to be light.

2. "Troubled" to Trusting | Confessing what disquiets and clinging to grace and truth.

"To Thee We Run," Marshall

COMMUNION |

There is a seventh-century Mexican "Carol 3" by Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz⁹ which declares,

Today you see in a stable
The Word speechless,
Greatness in smallness,
Immensity in blankets.
Such wonders!

He who had no beginning,
his being of Time begins;
the Creator, as a creature,
is now subject to our griefs.
Such wonders!

The Word became flesh, dwelt among us, and was broken for our sin, had his life poured out that our lives by be his, whole and forever. We do this as often as we can to remember "Such Wonders!" in Jesus' name, Amen.

"All Glory Be to Christ," Kensrue

BENEDICTION | Psalm 84:1-7

What a beautiful home, God-of-the-Angel-Armies!
We've always longed to live in a place like this,
Always dreamed of a room in your house,
where we could sing for joy to God-alive!

Birds find nooks and crannies in your house,
sparrows and swallows make nests there.
These ladies lay their eggs and raise their young,
singing their songs in the place where we worship.
God-of-the-Angel-Armies! King! God!
How blessed they are to live and sing there!

And how blessed all those in whom you live,
whose lives become roads you travel;
We wind through lonesome valleys, come upon brooks,
discover cool springs and pools brimming with rain!
God-traveled, these roads of life together in Jesus curve up the mountain, and
at the last turn—Zion! God in full view!

⁹ Quoted in Gross, 63.