

**2** In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi<sup>[a]</sup> from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking,

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east<sup>[b]</sup> and have come to pay him homage.”

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah<sup>[c]</sup> was to be born.

<sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd<sup>[d]</sup> my people Israel.’ ”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

<sup>8</sup> Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

<sup>9</sup> When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

<sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped,<sup>[e]</sup> they were overwhelmed with joy.

<sup>11</sup> On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

## LIGHT BULB MOMENTS

EPIPHANY JANUARY 7, 2024

MATTHEW 2: 1-12

As I was anticipating this sermon, this Sunday,  
it took a lot to quiet all that was swirling around in my mind.

Variously, my attention was holding onto Christmas energy,  
awaiting the sad task of de-decorating,  
managing expectations of beginning the New Year with two  
churches, at new times...and the sense of helplessness  
about the forecast's impact on gathering for worship.

Thankfully, God has a way of settling our restlessness.  
In the midst of uncertainty and enthusiasm,  
in the midst of our ups and downs,  
God patiently waits for us to suspend our sometimes  
frenetic activity long enough to notice the light provided to us.

Today, we visit the passage of Scripture  
our Bible subtitled The Visit of the Magi.  
Though long before Edison's invention changed the world,  
these verses are what we might call a Light Bulb Moment.

January 6<sup>th</sup> being the date our church calendars mark as The Epiphany, this passage from Matthew essentially concludes the Christmas Season.

What does Epiphany mean, after all? A revelation. Something revealed. We're reminded of the prophetic words from Advent: *The people in darkness have seen a great light.* This is all about a great, God given Light Bulb Moment.

We are told Herod was King and that Jesus had already been born in Bethlehem. Who ARE these visitors, anyway? *MAGI*. For centuries, people in and out of churches have wondered, really, who...what?!...are these people? In this case, Magi does not imply they were magicians. If they were, why would they have bothered to consult Herod? Couldn't they just have conjured up a Harry Potter spell and commanded, "Accio...Christ Child!"?

More likely, they were seekers. Not people of Torah Law, they were perhaps considered priests within their own culture. Scripture does not tell us precisely where their native land was, but it may have been Persia, Babylon, modern day Iraq or Iran. Wherever the place, we may interpret that they were respected as wise...professors of special or secret wisdom.

Of a time and place where every answer were not readily available at one's fingertips, these were people who literally looked to the heavens...to the stars...  
to make sense of life here on earth. Their life's work was seeking and being open to the Light Bulb Moments of life.

Arriving in Jerusalem, they begin asking the locals for the whereabouts of this child born to be their king. Not surprisingly, the reigning king, Herod, was troubled by news of a challenger.

Renown for his tremendous and grand building projects, including the magnificent Temple, Herod was also greatly feared for his intolerance of dissent and paranoia, having executed many, including his wife and son, whom he considered disloyal to his authority.

That kind of raging instability explains why all of Jerusalem was upset, too: Since Herod is a loose cannon, and he is disturbed, who knows how he will react?

Herod, for entirely self-centered purposes, gathers his resident experts, his own priests and scribes, to ascertain where this threat may be located. Drawing from the Hebrew Scriptures, they tell him what we already know: Bethlehem is the place.

Bethlehem: Where Jacob buried Rachel.  
The site of hometown hero David. Where Ruth married Boaz.  
This is the place to which the Magi are dispatched.

The Christ Child is not some vague idea. The Christ Child is real and among people. His location was not some general region. Rather, he was living in a particular, specific place.

The reality of this is our Light Bulb Moment!

More than an ancient story, this is our encounter with the Christ Child. As much as Jesus is up there, out there, in the heavens, beyond our capacity to comprehend, Jesus is real and present, in the midst of our very lives.

In my time interning at the Pastoral Care department at the hospital while in seminary, the Chaplain asked me about my theology. After I answered, he said, "Ah! You are incarnational!" I said, "Actually, I am Presbyterian by way of the Catholic Church." Playfully swatting me with a notebook, he said, "I mean that you experience Christ present here and now." "Yes," I said, "If not, then why bother?"

For Matthew, for the Jewish Christian audience who first heard this Gospel account, this Light Bulb Moment of identifying Bethlehem need not be a surprise:

***In Jesus, there is the coming together  
of what the Hebrew Testament promised; and  
In Jesus, those outside the boundaries of Israel  
are welcomed into the love and compassion of God.***

Interestingly, notice what happens.

Those outsiders, those seekers, those mysterious travelers journey onward.

The one seemingly with authority, Herod, could not tolerate the idea of anyone interfering with his narcissism.

The ones with information, like the religious experts, stay home. We might have thought THEY were supposed to be wise, informed, and aware. The experts, the ones who knew from Scripture and tradition where Jesus was, were indifferent to seek something that might complicate the practice of religion.

And we thought the modern church was the first group to say, “Well, we’ve never done it THAT way before”?

Our translation says that were “overwhelmed with joy.”  
Literally translated, they “rejoiced with great joy exceedingly.”

Does the light bulb illuminate our imagination  
to hear the difference?

Scholar and pastoral writer Jill Duffield puts it this way:

*When was the last time and experience of Jesus overwhelmed you with joy? When pointing to the brokenness and suffering of our world comes easily to us, seeing the holy right in front of us and responding with joy often eludes us. If where the Holy Spirit is, there is joy, then surely our lives and our worship and our congregations should be, at least some of the time, overwhelmed with joy.*

(Duffield, Jill. 2019. In Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship. Year A, Vol. 1. Green, Long, Powery, Rigby, Sharp, Eds. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. P. 160).

As much as we are tempted to morph Gospels, placing everyone into Luke’s stable on a cold night warmed with the rough company of barnyard animals and unkempt shepherds, Matthew’s version does not give us that.

The Epiphany visit, we are told, happens not in a barn but in a house. The travelers arrive at a house, not a stable. Jesus is likely a toddler with his mom, no longer a newborn on a bed of straw.

Before presenting those famous gifts, they pay him homage. The word appears three times in these 12 verses. The word conveys much more than a tip of the cap, more than a gesture of a nod in deference. To pay homage is a significant physical display of submission.

In other words, they gave themselves before they gave tangible gifts. Perhaps that, too, becomes a Light Bulb Moment for us.

In today's verses, in this Epiphany narrative, there is no clear voice of God splitting the sky or shocking people to the ground, trembling. Instead, there is a Star illuminating the path and dreams counseling the way...

As the festive lights of Christmas get packed away until December, let's promise to God, ourselves, and each other, to remain attentive to the Light Bulb Moments God holds for each and all of us!



