

Glimpses of God: Epiphany 2021
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC - January 3, 2021

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

Hymns: StS 32, HWB 220

Isaiah 60:1-6:

60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

60:2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

60:3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

60:4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

60:5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

60:6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

2:2 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."

2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

2:6 '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 my people Israel.'"

2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

2:8 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."

2:9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

2:11 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.

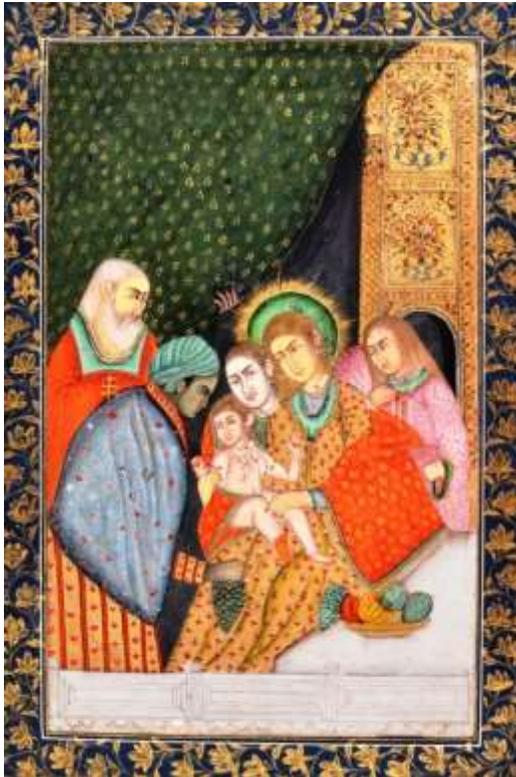
2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

As some of you might have heard, this year on Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year, just a few days before Christmas, there was an alignment of planets in our skies. For the first time in about 800 years, Jupiter and Saturn aligned and appeared as a bright star in the southwest, just after sunset. Some were calling this the “Christmas Star,” partly because of it appearing on Dec. 21st, but also because this is likely the kind of “star” that the Magi followed on their journey to visit the child Jesus. Retired professor Brian Martin of King’s University in Edmonton notes that in 2 B.C.E., there was a similar event, with Jupiter (the king of the Roman gods) aligning with other royal or “kingly” stars. Martin says, “If you saw the king of the gods circling around the king star, Regulus, in the constellation Leo [the lion being the ‘king of the beasts’], that would get your attention if you were an astrologer.”¹ No wonder the Magi got ideas about the birth of a king! I find it fascinating to think of this connection to the Magi of two thousand years ago, and I was all excited to look at this special event in the sky on winter solstice, and had my family all ready to look at it with me – and then, wouldn’t you know, it was cloudy that night, and we couldn’t see anything of the special Christmas Star. Thanks, 2020, for another let-down...

The story of the Magi – or the Three Kings, or Wise Men – has an interesting history in the Christian tradition. We tend to mostly lump it in with the rest of the Christmas story, as if the shepherds and the Magi were all in the stable together visiting the Christ-child on the night he was born. But in the Bible, the shepherds and the Magi don’t even appear in the same Gospel! Luke speaks only of shepherds visiting the

¹ https://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/jupiter-saturn-christmas-star-1.5849913?_vfz=medium%3Dsharebar&fbclid=IwAR3MSvDUeL-YwQr9gOKkoHDXAPAu3nQhy05XFisadJxeNJJb_E3VsWyx_0

stable on the night of Jesus' birth, and Matthew only of the Magi, who visited later. That's partly why, twelve days after Christmas, there is this separate day of celebration of the Magi's visit to the Christ-child – Epiphany, meaning “to appear” or “show forth,” relating to the revelation of the very face of God in the Christ-child.² That was the “aha-moment” of the Magi.



And if we look carefully at the biblical texts, we notice that we've made all kinds of other assumptions and embellished the story with all kinds of traditions that actually aren't found in the text itself. We have in our heads the three Kings of art and nativity scenes: two usually depicted as lighter-skinned and one darker-skinned, one usually depicted as older, with white hair and beard. They wear beautiful, elaborate robes as they offer their gifts to the holy family. (This can be seen in the painting

above from 1800, artist unknown, Museum of New Delhi.)³

So what does it actually say in Matthew chapter 2? We are simply told that “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” (v. 1-2). Now the word “wise men” here in the Greek is simply the word, Magi,

² Margaret Loewen Reimer, *Approaching the Divine: Signs and Symbols of the Christian Faith* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2017), 26.

³ The Nativity of Christ (1800), Unknown Artist, Museum of New Delhi, <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57998>

meaning astrologers, or people who study the stars, so some translations call them “Wisdom-Seekers” (First Nations Version). As Mary Lou Driedger observed on her blog, there is actually no mention of the number of Magi. We’ve assumed it’s three based on the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that are mentioned in verse 11. But, says Driedger, “early Christian writings say there were four of them and St. Augustine said there were twelve. A pope in the year 400 decreed their number to be three.” And this little detail leads her to further questions: “Some translations of the Bible don’t mention ‘men’, they just say astrologers. Could some have been women? Did they ride on camels? We have no idea. The Bible makes no mention of camels.”⁴ You can see how some of the traditional imagery of the Magi starts to unravel here, in the face of the lack of biblical evidence. This can be kind of disconcerting. But rather than worry about how we’ve gotten the Magi wrong, with our assumptions about three men riding on camels, Driedger uses this as an opportunity to re-envision the Magi in more inclusive ways (in her case, for a children’s Sunday School lesson she was writing for the Jubilee series). The point of the story in Matthew is that anyone, even outsiders like these strangers from far away, is welcome in the stable. She says, “I wanted to make the Magi story inclusive and inviting, demonstrating that all kinds of people from different backgrounds and races and genders and classes of society had been invited into Mary and Joseph’s circle to get to know Jesus.” And Denny Bond, the artist for the Sunday School materials created a beautiful illustration to reflect Driedger’s reinterpretation of the Magi, depicting six of them of different races, ages, and genders:

⁴ Thanks to Mary Lou for giving me permission to share her research on and interpretation of the Magi in this sermon. Mary Lou Driedger, “The Magi Got Me Into Trouble,” Dec. 23, 2011, <https://maryloudriedger2.wordpress.com/2011/12/23/the-magi-got-me-into-trouble/?fbclid=IwAR0UulcqxMYJNTPoroRVPazx12r4S4ZXTb6IW6qNS7qkuOWf4Nui6RXLII>



I see a profound lesson in Driedger's reinterpretation of the Magi. These days especially, it's so easy for many of us to fall into glass-half-empty thinking, focusing on all that we can't do, all that we've lost, all that is disconcerting and on shaky ground. And I don't want to deny the importance of making time and space for the reality of grief. But I know I often need reminding that the glass is half full. In this case, we are not left with nothing because some of the details of the Magi were embellished over the years. What we are left with, as Driedger recognizes, is itself beautiful: we have these wise people, however many they were, willing to take risks and to travel great distances in search of the Divine. They travelled in what those pre-motor-vehicle times would have been halfway across the known world just for a glimpse of God's face. And when they find the baby, their reaction is one of utter joy: "there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy" (v. 9-10). And out of this sense of joy, they offer those well-known, extravagant gifts of gold, frankincense,

and myrrh to the child – gifts associated with royalty but also, in the case of frankincense and myrrh, with healing.⁵ The Magi came face to face with God, they caught a glimpse of the Divine, not by pure chance, but because they were paying attention to the right things; they were watching for God. That is why they are called wise, I think: because they know what to watch for, and they are willing to travel into the unknown to meet God. Even when it comes time for them to go home, they are faced with the unfamiliar: they cannot return the way they came. They cannot simply retrace their steps. And yet they are adaptable enough to listen to the message from their dreams and return home by another way, for safety. They are wise enough to adapt to the unexpected.

This past year has been one long exercise in adaptation to the unfamiliar, and I have been so grateful for the graciousness and wisdom of this congregation as we have adapted to being church in a pandemic, together yet apart. I recently heard of a pastor in the U.S. who is being fired by her congregation for refusing to hold regular, full, worship services with singing during this time. I am so glad that has not been the path we have been on, in more ways than one! I see in the story of the Magi, with all of its gaps and silences and possibilities, a profound question that applies to many challenges and life circumstances. It's the question of whether we are paying attention, whether we are wise enough to watch for God, to seek the signs of God's presence and work among us, even if it doesn't look like we expected it to look. There's this joke that my dad used to tell that gets at this question. There's a man who is stranded on the roof of his house in the middle of a flood, and the water is rising all around him. Someone

⁵ Rev. Robb McCoy, "Epiphany – The First Baby Shower," <https://fatpastor.me/2013/12/31/epiphany-the-first-baby-shower/>

comes by with a boat, and says, "Get in, I'll take you to safety!" And the man says, "No, God will save me." Then he waits a bit longer and a helicopter comes by. The man waves it off, saying, "I don't need rescuing; God is going to save me!" Well, the flood waters rise, and the man drowns. So he gets to heaven and says to God, "Why didn't you rescue me? I waited and waited, and you never showed up!" And God says, "What do you mean, I sent a boat and a helicopter and you didn't take either of them!" What we're waiting for and paying attention to makes all the difference when it comes to catching glimpses of God.

The prophet Isaiah similarly points us in an unexpected place with the vivid imagery of chapter 60. It says,

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; 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. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD. (Isa. 60:1-6)

Well, I have good news and bad news about this passage. The good news is that this is where some of our traditional imagery for the Magi comes from! Here we have the camels and the kings – but notice also that we have sons and daughters mentioned.

The bad news is that there is another reframing of imagery, as Christ is the radiant light of the dawn. This is one of the biblical passages that speaks of Jesus as the "Morning Star." In 1 Peter 1:19, Jesus is the Morning Star who rises in people's hearts, while Revelation 2:28 and 22:16, Jesus is identified as "the root and the descendant of David,

the bright morning star.”⁶ So our expectations of the story of the Magi are once again upended, as Jesus is revealed as the Star that the Magi had been following all along. Jesus is the Morning Star, a glimpse of God’s shining glory marking the dawn of hope and new life. Did you know about this name for Jesus? I have to admit, it was a new



one for me, but one that illustrates so well our journey of discipleship, of following Jesus’ way of justice and peace, the way the Magi followed the bright star to Bethlehem.

So, with this unfamiliar Divine name rising in our hearts, may we go into this new year as the Magi set out on their journey: following Jesus, the bright

Morning Star, with the hope of glimpsing God face to face, with the wisdom of adapting to unforeseen circumstances along the way, knowing that even if the path is unfamiliar, it is still the way home. AMEN

⁶ Loewen Reimer, 26.