

Wonder and Wisdom: Epiphany Sunday
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – Jan. 8, 2023

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Hymns: Longing for Light (VT 715); Let There Be Light (VT 714)

Isaiah 60:1-6

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

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

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

⁴Lift 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 in their nurses' arms.

⁵Then 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.

⁶A 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:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

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.' "

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Last summer, scientists launched a powerful new telescope, the James Webb space telescope. Unlike Hubble and its other predecessors, this one can capture ultraviolet and different levels of infrared light, taking pictures of things well beyond our human range of vision. It can also take clearer pictures of further out in space than we've ever glimpsed as humans. Though I don't understand all the science of it (with light years and the part where you get so far away it becomes time travel somehow!), ¹ I've been quite fascinated with the beauty of the pictures that the Webb telescope has taken of faraway nebulae (coloured dust clouds from the death of a star or in which new stars are born), such as this one, called the Pillars of Creation nebula. To me, these are awe-inspiring images that speak to the vastness and mystery of God's creation – and Godself, really. It becomes a reminder that at the end of the day, there is so much that we don't know or understand about God and the universe, and the response to this is not despair, but wonder and awe.

This Epiphany Sunday we come to that familiar story about gazing at the heavens and trying to decipher the stars – the story of the Magi. Now it's always interesting to re-read this biblical story and realize all the things that don't actually appear in the text, which is only found in one Gospel – Matthew! It would seem that there are a lot of assumptions and layers of tradition which Christians have added to this story over the centuries. Perhaps this is with good reason, since the text itself doesn't give us much detail. First, we have the timing. We commemorate Epiphany twelve days after Christmas (yes, the twelve days of Christmas, like the song!) because

¹ <https://www.space.com/james-webb-space-telescope-earliest-galaxies>

the Magi actually visited the Christ-child much later. They made their seemingly belated appearance in Bethlehem up to two years after his birth. Our manger scenes and retellings of the nativity story tend to blend it all together, picturing kings and shepherds and everyone all in the stable together on Christmas Eve. But it seems there was no angelic choir that appeared to the Magi (too far away, I guess?), and they had to figure it out for themselves through a different heavenly sign: the star that appeared, which they deciphered as the sign of a royal birth and decided to follow all the way to Judea. It apparently took a lot longer than the journey of the shepherds, who happened to be Bethlehem locals.

Next assumption: that there were three male kings or wise men who rode camels to Bethlehem. We're told that there were three gifts given to the child, but not actually how many Magi there were. So "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."² So there may have been a whole group of these Magi who followed the star to Bethlehem. We're also not told that they are men or kings. The Greek here just says Magi, meaning astrologers, or people who study the stars. The First Nations Version calls them "Wisdom-Seekers." The kings and camels bit, as you heard, comes from the Isaiah passage (v. 3 and 6), which has been imported into Matthew's account! This has led some, including Mary Lou Driedger, to let their imaginations run wild when it comes to who was all included among those "Magi." Could it have been a group of various astrologers of different genders and ages and identities? Concerning her reimagining of the story, Driedger writes, "I wanted to make the Magi story inclusive and inviting,

² 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>

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."³ Janet McKenzie has also created a beautiful painting of the Magi as three women. Matthew's point in writing this is to suggest that anyone, even outsiders like these strangers from far away, is welcome in the stable. These astrologers from the East, well outside of the bounds of Israel, were in fact wiser in seeking out Jesus and recognizing him as the newborn king than Herod, the reigning Israelite king himself. This group of Magi, re-envisioned as diverse, thus becomes representative of all of us, inclusive of all of those who seek wisdom.

The reaction of the Magi to the end of their journey is also something that isn't reflected in our usual thinking about this event. Manger scenes tend to depict very serious, sombre Magi in the stable. But Matthew talks about a different reaction altogether. There, it says, "they were overwhelmed with joy"! They were absolutely delighted by what they found! Isaiah, too, speaks of joyful feelings like this: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ...Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice" (v. 1, 5). These are reactions of joy and wonder at what lies at the end of the Magi's journey. They are delighted; they radiate joy when they at last come face to face with the Christ-child. This is when they have their aha-moment, their epiphany, realizing what their long journey was all about: this child who is somehow the Light and Wisdom of the world.

I was reminded of the poem "O Emmanuel," by Malcolm Guite, which though written for Advent, has many Epiphany images in it:

³ Driedger, "The Magi Got Me Into Trouble."

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.⁴

This mystery of the “long-sought witness for a world without,” this “hidden spring of light” and wisdom, this lowly child who was also, against all expectations, the Prince of Peace – this is what drew the Magi to follow that star across the vast distance. And yet the point wasn’t only to witness to Christ’s light with joy and wonder, but also to become those who themselves shine: to carry the radiance with them when they returned home, transformed.

These days, we are very accustomed to the darkness. This week, I’ve been leaving and returning home in darkness. It’s a time when stargazing is convenient, if nothing else, since the nights are so long. In this season, in the Northern Hemisphere, that longing for light becomes something very concrete that’s echoed in the natural world around us. In keeping with that, and the Magi’s example of looking to the skies for wisdom, Wendy Janzen reminds us to learn from the wisdom of creation during this time of winter, speaking of the “gifts of winter dormancy.” She writes, “Winter is a season of dormancy: of patience, stillness, resting, darkness, and mystery. As we learn to accept

⁴ <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2011/12/21/o-emmanuel-a-final-advent-sonnet-and-a-hidden-message/>

the gifts of winter, we learn to observe and appreciate the beauty, wonder, and solace of a slower time.” This slower time can be an opportunity to reflect on “what kinds of epiphanies we might watch for” in our own lives and communities.⁵ Where is God at work, bringing light that leads to a way forward, or maybe even unexpected joy?

Along similar lines, Katherine May uses “wintering” as a verb, a metaphor for both the season and the times in our lives when illness or grief forces us to slow down and take time to mourn and/or recover. Her book is called *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*. She writes, “Plants and animals don’t fight the winter; they don’t pretend it’s not happening and attempt to carry on living the same lives that they lived in the summer. They prepare. They adapt. They perform extraordinary acts of metamorphosis to get them through. Winter is a time of withdrawing from the world, maximising scant resources, carrying out acts of brutal efficiency and vanishing from sight; but that’s where the transformation occurs. Winter is not the death of the life-cycle, but its crucible.”

“Once we stop wishing it were summer, winter can be a glorious season in which the world takes on a sparse beauty and even the pavements sparkle. It’s a time for reflection and recuperation, for slow replenishment, for putting your house in order.”⁶

Those who have experienced this kind of “wintering” come out the other side having gained wisdom, says May. In her words, “Wintering brings about some of the most profound and insightful moments in our human experience, and wisdom resides in those who have wintered. In our relentlessly busy contemporary world, we are forever

⁵ Wendy Janzen, “January: The Gifts of Winter Dormancy,” Wild Church Worship Service, 2022, <https://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/82/26222>

⁶ Katherine May, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2020), 14-15.

trying to defer the onset of winter... We must learn to invite winter in. We may never choose winter, but we can choose how.”⁷

As we continue to journey through the literal darkness of this time of year, may this kind of wisdom be our guide as it was for the Magi of long ago: looking to heaven and earth for signs of God’s presence in God’s good creation, watching and waiting for the light of the new dawn, and shining with that radiance wherever we find ourselves.

AMEN

⁷ May, *Wintering*, 13.