

By Another Way!



EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD
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Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in and pay him homage." 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Imagine someone walking through a dark room. They are unfamiliar with their surroundings and unsure of what lies in front of them. They stumble, knock into furniture, and lose their way. Suddenly someone turns on a small lamp that gives off just enough light to reveal what's there. Now they can dimly perceive see a path, avoid the obstacles, and even notice things of beauty they couldn't see before in that room.

Without the light, we misunderstand what's around us. But with the light, we can see clearly. Epiphany reminds us that Christ doesn't simply bring light; He is the light that helps us truly see. Epiphany is about revelation, the light of Christ shining into darkness, revealing truth, purpose, and direction. Just as the light exposes what is hidden in the dark, Christ reveals what is real in our lives and in the world.

Matthew tells us that the Magi observe a usually brilliant star in the night sky and they follow its light. When they get to Jerusalem, they expect to find the child who has been born king of the Jews. But he's not there. They inquire about him and

they are sent to the small, lowly town of Bethlehem. When you think about it, it's really quite amazing that Magi, well-educated astrologers from the east, make a journey so far away to find this newborn king of the Jews.

We really don't know how many Magi came to see Jesus. But what we do know is that somehow they wanted to visit this special child, even though they themselves are Gentiles. Nor do we know where they come from. They could be from Babylon, Persia or Arabia. And though the carol says, "*We Three Kings of Orient Are*," they probably are not kings. Rather they are probably advisors to kings. The notion they're kings comes from Psalm 72 that says, "*kings will render the child tribute.*"

Isn't it ironic that when the Magi arrive in Jerusalem to inquire about the child born king of the Jews, it seems to be of little interest among the religious leaders? They know their scriptures well. But until Herod inquires of them, they don't recognize their knowledge or to look carefully at the evidence before them. What hinders their ability to see the star? After all, it is their prophecies of scripture, along with the star, that lead the wise men to Bethlehem.

The arrival and questions of the wise men are, in effect, an announcement to all Jews that their king had been born and is worthy of worship. And yet the religious leaders do nothing. They don't even go to Bethlehem with the wise men to see for themselves.

The long-awaited king and Savior is in their midst, and it is a group of *Gentiles* that shows the most interest. Perhaps it is the Magi who recognize that this new king will have universal importance. Matthew closes his gospel with reference to Jesus' command to the disciples. "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*" So, in Matthew's gospel, it isn't the local folk to whom God-with-us is first revealed. It is to the Magi, who are foreigners, strangers, outsiders. They are the ones who interpret dreams and interrogate the night sky for signs. Nor is Jesus found in the grand holy city of Jerusalem, with its magnificent temple at the center of religious, political, and economic power. Instead, God chooses Bethlehem, a small, lowly village. God's anointing isn't going to rest upon the great and powerful King Herod. No, it will rest upon this vulnerable child-Messiah who "*will save his people from their sins.*" God goes by another way.

Now King Herod the Great rules in a terrifying era fueled by chaos and trauma for the Jewish people. To be sure, Herod's immense wealth funded numerous (and beautiful) building projects, including multiple palatial fortresses, as well as the reconstruction and expansion of the Jerusalem temple.

But Herod is also a ruthless tyrant, cementing his authority by brutal displays of dominance. He is perfectly willing to torture and kill his perceived opponents, even his own wife and sons. He reflects the reality that tyrants will do whatever it takes to protect their rule, even if it means destroying innocent lives.

When Herod hears about the purpose of the Magi's visit, things began to happen. Herod and "*all Jerusalem with him are frightened.*" Herod calls for the visitors and instructs them to "*go and search diligently for the child so he may go and pay him homage,*" which, as we know, was not his intention at all. In Herod's view, there is no greater threat to his rule, than one who is prophesied in ancient texts and acknowledged as king by Gentiles from afar. If this child-king is the Messiah, he will rule under the authority of God.

But Jesus will be unlike Herod, whose political strings are held by Roman puppet-masters. This king will rule in a different way. It is not way in which Herod is accustomed. Thus, Herod becomes confused, troubled, and stirred up. He is terrified of losing power, and Matthew says the people of Jerusalem are terrified as well because they fear the crushing blows, they will suffer under any conflict between Herod and his opposition. Their fears are justified when Herod later orders the murder of young boys to destroy the child Jesus.

The Magi find Jesus and present him with gifts. It is possible these gifts make it possible for Joseph and Mary and Jesus to flee to Egypt. Or, maybe they keep them as a reminder of the incredible gift they have been given, as they raise the Son of God. For them, gold is a proper gift for royalty. Frankincense is used in worship and offerings and points to Jesus' holiness. Myrrh was used to anoint every part of the tabernacle in the wilderness, but it is also used for burials. It is a gift that points to the sacrifice Jesus will make for the whole world. The Magi give gifts from their hearts and are transformed as they worship Jesus. And then, "*having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they leave for their own country by another road.*" They listen and obey.

So, what does this all mean for us? Moving ahead 2,000 years, we find our own lives parallel the wise men's trek to find the king: seeking, worshiping, giving and going a different way. We live in a world where many voices call us in a multitude of spiritual directions. There are organized mainstream denominations, non-denominational contemporary opportunities. There is SBNR (spiritual but not religious) yearnings, Eastern religions, or no religion at all. Is it any wonder there are many confused people seeking an encounter with God in a way that is both relevant and life-changing?

The wise men went seeking using the understanding they already had. God met them and led them to the truth. Ultimately, we seek God when we give him our whole heart. So, what does that look like? Here is an example: C. S. Lewis grew up in the church but, by the age of 15, he decided he was an atheist. God was silent and his prayers ineffective to prevent the

death of his mother when he was 10. So, Lewis saw no use for God. But God was not done with him! After earning his degree from Oxford University, Lewis accepted a position at Magdalen College. While there, he found his beliefs challenged by very learned men and eventually, he gave his heart to Jesus. He described the event like this, *"You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me."* He goes on to say, *"I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."* From that day forward, Lewis went home by another way, becoming one of the most influential Christian authors and minds of the 20th century. Today we celebrate Epiphany — and we remember the brilliant star showing the way, the wise men who came seeking Jesus, the joy they experienced as they were transformed, and the journey as they traveled by another way.

Epiphany is a promise that God is here with us, whether we notice the signs or not. History and current events are rife with examples of earthly powers that are manifested through violence. Even this child, whose birth is marked by a rising brilliant star, will die by violence. In the light of such an end, the Gospels are clear that God's way is not of violence and oppression. It is of love, care, and concern for others. The baby born in Bethlehem will lead in the way of a shepherd. He will preach and enact blessings upon the humble, the grieving, the meek, and others—even the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. The birth of God's Messiah is a sign to the world for healing and life. In this Epiphany season God invites us to go by another way, the way of Jesus.

In Jesus name, amen.