

Rev. Lisa Schrott
January 8, 2023
Matthew 2:1-12
From Generation to Generation: We Keep Seeking

Prayer of Illumination

God of starlight, every part of us is trying to seek you: our bodies that carried us into this space, our heads bowed in prayer, our hearts that keep whispering, "There is more than just this." Quiet the rest of the world. Open the door to us. We know you're near, so know that it's you we seek. Find us in these words. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Throughout the Advent and Christmas season, we spent much of our time in the Gospel of Luke. Luke's Gospel shares the good news of a savior who will lift up the humble and fill the hungry with good things. Luke proclaims this Messiah through the stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth and the birth of the one we know as John the Baptist; through the story of the annunciation – of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary to tell her of the good news that she is to bear the Christ child; through the story of the journey to Bethlehem - a story we reenacted on Christmas Eve during our *Las Posadas* service - and through the birth story of Jesus and the visit of the shepherds who heard the good news from the heavenly host. The shepherds went to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened, the first people to seek out and pay homage to the infant Jesus - a Savior born to them; the Messiah, the Lord.

This morning we hear of another group who were seeking to pay homage to Jesus – a decidedly different group than the shepherds. Hear now these words from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 2.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, 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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.' "

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." 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. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

We have arrived at Epiphany Sunday – for Western Christians the end of the Christmas season. Technically Thursday was the twelfth day of Christmas and Epiphany was Friday – January 6. Now for some of you, it may feel like Christmas has been over for a while, all packed up and waiting for next year. Or it may feel like Christmas didn't really happen this year – or at least in the way you expected - because weather or illness impacted your plans. Epiphany Sunday gives us another moment to pause and reflect and to bring our gifts to the one whose birth we celebrate.

The festival of Epiphany originated in the Eastern branch of the church – and its celebration is actually older than the celebration of Christmas. It is mentioned as far back as 200 CE (AD) by Clement of Alexander. By the 4th century, it was one of the three main festivals in the Eastern Church, along with Easter and Pentecost. In the Western Church it was adopted in the middle of the 4th century, around the same time the Christmas festival was adopted. It was considered a festival of great significance to the churches centered in Rome. The word epiphany in Greek means “manifestation” and the festival commemorated the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. The magi are seen as representative of all the non-Jewish people to whom Christ came.¹

While the Gospel of Matthew has a focus on Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures, as a commentator has noted, “One of the Gospel of Matthew’s major themes is that God’s salvation extends beyond Jesus’ immediate Jewish community to include the Gentiles as well (in other words, to include everyone). The visit of the Magi foreshadows this broad message of inclusion.”² The Gospel of Matthew ends in chapter 28 with The Great Commission, with Jesus saying to the disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” The Epiphany and The Great Commission frame the story of Jesus’ life. “Within these two bookends, Matthew’s message is clear: Not only supposed insiders, but also supposed outsiders are within the great circle of divine love.”³

Now it may be a stretch – or may be not – but I like to think of my cat Sebastian as part of this divine circle of love – for he too went in search of the baby Jesus this Christmas season, and like the shepherds and magi, he too found them. For those who I haven’t inundated with stories and pictures of Sebastian, he is a kitten Brian and I adopted in September after our longtime beloved cat Mr. Grendel died. Brian and I have never had a kitten before, and Sebastian is as adorable as he is adventurous. Everything is a toy – I mean everything – including the figures in our nativity sets. Sometime before Christmas, baby Jesus disappeared from the nativity. The shepherds were knocked over, Mary and Joseph pushed to the side. It looked like a tornado had swept through – or maybe a bar brawl broke out – but the end result was Jesus was missing. I should have spent time searching for Jesus, after all I am a pastor, but Christmas is a busy time of the year and I kind of forgot about him. That is until December 29, when Sebastian was playing with something under the couch, and lo and behold, he found Jesus! I finally wrestled Jesus away from Sebastian, and promptly put him

¹ L.W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer. *The Christian Calendar*. G & C Merriam Co., 1974 p 33-35.

² Showings: Salt’s Commentary for Epiphany and Jesus’ Baptism.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2023/1/2/showing-forth-salts-commentary-for-epiphany-and-jesus-baptism>

³ *ibid*

back in the nativity – which actually translated to Sebastian jumping onto the table with the nativity and continuing to play with Jesus in his manger. I got a cute picture of the scenario to post on FB – Sebastian paying homage to the baby Jesus. Maybe not quite in the same way as the magi, for he brought no gifts, but I think he showed some of the same intensity seeking Jesus as the magi did.

And what do we know about these magi? Matthew's gospel tells us that they came to Jerusalem looking for the child who has been born king of the Jews because they had observed his star in the east.

In article originally published in the online journal *The Conversation*, and reprinted in the *Presbyterian Outlook* where I read it, and in the *Lansing State Journal* where some of you may have seen it, Professor Eric Vanden Eykel, highlights the mystery of the magi. He says, "Because Matthew doesn't bother to say exactly who these visitors were supposed to be, the magi have fascinated readers and kept them guessing for nearly 2,000 years. They have been imagined as Zoroastrian priests, astrologers and, of course, as kings. They have appeared in various forms in paintings, in film, in literature and in song. Given the complex nature of the word magi in the ancient world, one has to wonder if Matthew chose this word precisely to inspire a sense of mystery in his readers, and to keep them wondering about who the magi actually were".⁴

While we may not know their precise identity, we can think of these magi as seekers – seekers of not just knowledge, but at a deeper level, seekers of meaning. They sought the meaning of a star they observed in the night sky.

Our popular notion is that there was a bright star that hovered over the nativity. We depict that in our Christmas cards and it is the origin of the star on top of the Christmas tree. But scripture tells us a different story. The magi noticed the star among the thousands of other stars. Like the amazing pictures we are seeing from the James Webb telescope that reveal stars that we can now see that we never noticed before, the magi took note of a star in the east and sought its meaning.

A star that is visible to many, including King Herod and those in Jerusalem, yet it is the magi that notice it and seek its meaning – its relevance. As a commentator noted, "Matthew's theme here is the hiddenness of Christ, the small and often unnoticed ways God enters our lives in epiphanies large and small. This hiddenness is a kind of divine signature: instead of "showing forth" conspicuously at the Jerusalem Temple, God slips into the world by way of a poor family, under the heavy thumb of Roman taxation policy in a backwater town. And instead of "showing forth" to a crowd of supposed insiders, God will be noticed first by strangers, "wise ones from the East."⁵

⁴ Eric Vanden Eykel, Who were the 3 wise men who visited Jesus? Originally published in *The Conversation* at <https://theconversation.com/who-were-the-3-wise-men-who-visited-jesus-195159>; also available at <https://pres-outlook.org/2023/01/who-were-the-3-wise-men-who-visited-jesus/>

⁵ Showings: Salt's Commentary for Epiphany and Jesus' Baptism.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2023/1/2/showing-forth-salts-commentary-for-epiphany-and-jesus-baptism>

For me, in many ways, this passage helps me embrace the mystery of God and helps me embrace the spiritual practice of being a seeker. I believe in a Sovereign God who is also a deeply personal God; God whose love is as vast as the cosmos and as familiar as a whispered call in the night. The magi studied their star charts – they knew the charts so intimately that they noticed “a bright star in the east” that they knew was special. It was an omen, a harbinger of something important. We can speculate about whether it was an alignment of planets or a supernova or another celestial body, but at the end of the day it was something that made the magi take note. And since they were not Presbyterians, they didn’t form a committee to discuss it for months on end, they didn’t make a PowerPoint presentation to try and explain it, they got on their camels and went seeking what this sign meant.

To be a seeker is to notice. To be a seeker is to look for meaning. To be a seeker is to know that there is something deeper than what you see on the surface. To not just read a passage of scripture, but to pray with the scripture and meditate on the scripture and to let the Holy Spirit draw your eyes to a word or phrase you never noticed before, something that might be speaking into your life right now, in this moment. A word of encouragement, a word of challenge, a word of reassurance, a word of hope, a word you didn’t know that you needed to hear.

Last week in her sermon, Rebekah talked about the power of a word – of “the word” to change a life. This Sunday we are going to embrace the power of “a word” by incorporating a new prayer practice into our common life – the adoption of a Star Word.

As the creators of the Sanctified Art liturgy relate, Star Words are a prayer practice in churches all over the world on Epiphany Sunday. “There are many reasons behind this tradition. First, we know that the Magi followed a star, which ultimately led them to Jesus. Therefore, we too use all the resources we have available to us—including creative prayer practices and intention words for the new year—to move closer to Jesus. Secondly, we trust that God uses multiple ways to guide us and speak to us. Star words are one such lens that might provide us with a way to look for God in our midst, both actively and in hindsight. Finally, we know that the most common prayer practice for many involves speaking to God as opposed to silence or contemplation. However, this prayer practice invites a new prayer rhythm of reflection and review that can be a powerful way to connect with God.”⁶

While we partake of the Lord’s Supper this morning, you will be invited to take a star word from the baskets at front of the side aisles. Consider the word on your star as a guiding word for the year ahead. I invite you to remember your Star Word often, seeking the ways God might be moving through the meanings and definitions the word contains. If you are not able to be with us in person this morning and would like a Star Word, please contact me and I will give you one.

I hope and pray this will be an opportunity to seek the divine presence in 2023 in a fresh way. For that is one of the blessings of Epiphany – an opportunity for us all to be like the magi – seekers who are coming to pay homage to Jesus Christ, the Messiah. The magi brought gifts of gold, and frankincense and myrrh. We bring the gifts of our time, our prayers, our

⁶ Sarah (Are) Speed. Liturgy for Epiphany Star Words. sanctifiedart.com

intentions. We bring the gifts of wonder and awe for movement of God in our lives and in the world. We bring compassion and solidarity with those who are supposed outsiders, but we know are within the great circle of divine love. We bring our open hearts and curious minds as ones seeking to draw closer to this divine love in every facet of our lives. We bring the gift of seeking. Join me in prayer...