

**January 8, 2023. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis**

Let us pray. Almighty God, in this season of Epiphany you invite us to seek Christ's revelation. In the reading of this Scripture today, give us the eyes to see and ears to hear who Christ is — in the Bible and in the world around us. May this knowledge change us. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1 through 12. Listen now for the word of the lord. **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." **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.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I think the night sky is one of the most beautiful mysteries we have left in this world. It's alluring and draws you in. It's bright yet dark, radiant yet elusive. You must pay attention to find it and appreciate it's beauty. As humans have built cities, structures, and artificial light, it's made the night sky all more elusive and mysterious because we've covered it up. Now you must journey into the unknown to find it. Into those places still left untouched. And it's one of the great tragedies of our world that those places are disappearing at an alarming rate.

During those few special chances where I have been able to see the night sky in its glory – I'm always struck by how many shooting stars you can see. They feel so rare in our world of manmade cities and artificial lights, but they are common, we have just covered them up.

They call space the final frontier – a vast universe we are only beginning to comprehend its magnificence and how little we really are among it all.

Today we celebrate Epiphany – God's manifestation or self-revelation to the world in Jesus Christ – and it's symbolized in the star of the night sky.

A star that draws us in and fills us with wonder and joy, a star that shines light in the darkness – but a star that we must journey to see, because we've built a world that strives to cover it up.

The story of Epiphany is our scripture for today.

The magi see the star and know it means that the King of the Jews was born, and they are filled with wonder.

So much so, that they take a long journey from the east to find him and pay him homage. This story is only found in Matthew's gospel.

In Luke's gospel, the shepherds are the only ones to go and see the infant Jesus.

In Matthew, the magi are the only ones to go and see the infant Jesus.

And through the story of the magi, Matthew is telling us a lot about who Christ is – this newborn baby born to be the Messiah.

The story of epiphany is often overshadowed by the magi or the star – but really the story is always about who the star always leads us to – the baby in the manger. It's a story full of contrasts.

The word 'magi' comes from the Greek word 'magos,' which means astrologer. So, the magi are foreign astrologers that come seeking.

They are not Jewish, yet they know this baby is the King of the Jews, and they seek him with joy.

So, we have the foreign astrologers that come seeking with joy.

And then we have Herod and the chief priests and scribes. They are Jewish, yet they did not see the star. But they, too, are seeking.

They are seeking a stronger hold on their wealth and power because they know that this vulnerable infant lying in a manger will change everything. He will take from the powerful and give to the powerless.

They seek power so they tell the Magi where the baby is so that they can control him before it's too late.

Both the magi and Herod are seeking, yet it is only the magi who make the journey, because theirs is true seeking. Rooted in joy, not fear.

Matthew paints a vivid contrast of those who first seek Jesus, but he also paints a vivid contrast in geography.

Herod, the chief priests, and the scribes are in Jerusalem – the center of both political and religious power. A power they hold to manipulate the world around them at the expense of those on the margins.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a place that feels easily forgotten. It's inhabited by people at the margins. Peasants like Mary and Joseph. But it's there where God is at work in ways that will threaten the imperial power entrenched in Jerusalem.

The magi seek Jesus in wonder, Herod in fear. Jerusalem is where the fear and power reside, Bethlehem exists on the margins, where the powerless find their home.

God reveals God's self to world in a powerless place among the powerless, and the first to see God's revelation are gentile strangers. And when they see him the first thing they do is drop to their feet and pay him homage – an act that was a recognition of dependence, a giving of your entire self. These foreign astrologers are the first to make the journey, first to declare Jesus King, and the first to fall at his, giving their entire selves.

Matthew's birth account is rather remarkable. It begins with Jesus' genealogy – evidence to the Jewish people of his royal lineage. And then immediately he transitions to danger and fear.

There is danger even before Jesus is born – Joseph finds out Mary is pregnant, and Mary is in danger because Joseph could expose her publicly and ruin her life. We know he doesn't, but then once Jesus is born, he is immediately in danger again because Herod knows his true power. After our scripture Herod learns that the magi have tricked him, so he kills all the children in Bethlehem under two years old.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus become refugees and flee to Egypt for safety, and they must remain there until Herod dies. Already, in his infancy, the power of oppression and violence have touched his life.

Yet, Epiphany is right there in the middle of it. God reveals God's self through Jesus' birth into a place on the margins – and immediately after this revelation, danger and violence awaits.

Yet right there in the middle of it all is also joy. The magi see the star has stopped and are overwhelmed with joy. That verse could also be translated: "They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."

Joy is a powerful thing. We think it always comes naturally, but a lot of the time it takes work to find joy. We must stop and pay attention. We must view the world through new eyes – eyes that anticipate God's promise to make all things new. And then we must seek where that promise could take root.

In a dream, an angel of the Lord tells Joseph to name this baby Emmanuel – which means God is with us. For God to be truly with us, God must be revealed in the places that bring danger and pain, too.

But this is joy. To know that in every place we find ourselves, there is epiphany.

About a year ago, Nasa launched the James Webb telescope. It's truly a remarkable feat of engineering and already the pictures it has produced have given us a new lens to see the universe. The telescope is a million miles away – and because it takes time for light to travel – the picture we see from the Webb telescope are essentially looking back in time. What an epiphany that is – to see God revealed in the universe a million miles away. Even a million miles away, God is known.

Yet, here among us – Jesus' birth and epiphany teach us that God is being born and reborn in the margins, amongst danger, in places that are powerless, and reveals himself to the stranger. And just as we seek those desolate places to see the glory of the night sky – just as we seek engineering to see a million miles away – the joy of epiphany means we, too, must seek those places, those strangers, and see God revealed.