

## Epiphany of Our Lord C (1/6/2019)

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

**Matthew 2:1-12**

*If our faith rests on great epiphanies, then we're bound to become discouraged. Epiphanies – moments of clarity, conviction, and joy – are precious few. More often than not, our life's journey takes place in the shadows – in mundane, tiresome, even hopeless circumstances. We may long for epiphanies, but even the great biblical epiphanies point us to a God who is made known ultimately not in power and glory, but in vulnerability and love. In the end, our faith rests not on divine signs in the sky, but on the promise of divine accompaniment on the ground.*

Did you stay up for the fireworks on New Year's Eve? We didn't. Come to think of it, we haven't stayed up to see fireworks on New Year's Eve in several years, maybe five. I suspect it has something to do with having children. Nurturing little ones takes its toll, and we simply haven't had the energy to make it to midnight. It's an enduring tradition though, isn't it? The anticipation, the countdown, the moment of the New Year's arrival, and the thrill of the ensuing celebration, complete with signs in the sky. Each and every January 1<sup>st</sup> at midnight, fireworks signal the joy of new possibilities, the boldness of new commitments, and hope for the year to come.

And in that sense, fireworks at the New Year are a little like the star that leads the magi to the baby Jesus, the new king of Israel. There's a great deal of speculation, much of which is not based in Matthew's account, about who the magi were. In spite of the famous carol, they were not kings, and there weren't necessarily three of them. The magi were probably Zoroastrian priests from Persia, known for their skills in dream interpretation and astrology.<sup>1</sup> Hence the importance of the star in their quest to Bethlehem. In any case, they were not of the people of Israel – the magi were aliens,

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<sup>1</sup> Niveen Sarra, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3931](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3931).

Gentiles, representatives of the outside world. And, while offering gifts to a foreign ruler may have been a common practice of diplomacy, what's remarkable about this story is that the magi bypass Israel's official king in search of the true sovereign. Is it any surprise that Herod, a puppet of the Roman Empire, reacts like a tyrant? He's not pleased with the magi's news of the arrival of a new king, and he's willing to go to any diabolical length to preserve his power against a competitor, even sacrifice children.

The magi, however, play no part in Herod's murderous plot, but focus their attention solely on the sign in the sky that leads them to the promised one. And, their journey of faith is rewarded: "When they saw that the star had stopped [over the place where the child was], 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." **The star's guidance to the infant Jesus signals the joy of new possibilities, the boldness of new commitments, and hope for the years to come. It's an epiphany, a manifestation of God's goodness that bolsters the faith of the foreigners who have come to find him. As the child of Mary reveals, God's promise of faithfulness and mercy is not reserved for a single people in a single place, but extends to the whole world.**

This is not the only great epiphany in Jesus' story. On this festival day, we also recall the story of the Spirit's descent on Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan, as well as the miraculous provision of wine at the wedding at Cana. And, we'll conclude the season of Epiphany on Sunday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, with the story of the great revelation on the mountaintop, Jesus' transfiguration alongside Moses and Elijah. **These epiphanies are moments of divine transparency, visions of the truth that enlighten and**

**encourage those who are fortunate enough to witness them. What a thrill it would be, wouldn't it, to be party to such an event? It might not give you all the answers, but it would certainly give your faith a shot in the arm.**

The truth, however, is that most of us don't have the privilege of witnessing epiphanies, at least not very often. **Fireworks are uncommon in the life of faith. Moreover, when they do occur, mountaintop experiences inevitably lead us back down the mountain, back to the ordinary circumstances of our lives.**

Keith Miller speaks to the scarcity of epiphanies in a story about his own life of faith. He writes:

I was nervous waiting outside the hotel room for my appointment with Dr. Benton, who was conducting a series of seminars at our church. Finally my turn came.

"I pray regularly," I told him, "but so much of the time I don't feel that God hears me. Not only that, but I don't feel anything much, even when I tell Him I love Him. To pray at times like that seems insincere."

As we talked, I confessed that frequently I didn't feel anything during the communion service either.

The minister leaned back in his chair and thought a minute.

"Are you married?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Do you kiss your wife as you go out the door on the way to work?"

"Yes," I smiled. "Every day."

"Does it give you a great feeling of love every time you kiss her at the doorway?"

I had to admit that sometimes I couldn't even remember whether I had kissed her or not by the time I got to the office.

...Dr. Benton said that he felt the same way about habits of prayer and worship.

...And I saw that [he] was right: a deep loving relationship is woven out of a good many mundane responses which do not *feel* like love at all... at the time.<sup>2</sup>

**Dear church, if our faith rests on great epiphanies, then we're bound to become discouraged. Epiphanies – moments of clarity, conviction, and joy – are precious few. More often than not, our life's journey takes place in the shadows – in mundane, tiresome, even hopeless circumstances. We may long for epiphanies, but even the great biblical epiphanies point us to a God who is made known ultimately not in power and glory, but in vulnerability and love. Ours is a God of cradle and cross, feeding and foot washing, compassion and mercy – Immanuel, a God who is with us in our lived experiences. So in the end, it's not about the fireworks. Our faith rests not on divine signs in the sky, but on the promise of divine accompaniment on the ground.**

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<sup>2</sup> *Habitation of Dragons* 68-9.