

# **A Flood of Light**

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Matthew 2:1-12

We have made it, once again, through another holiday season. We have come through the watching and waiting that is the season of Advent, through the warm glow of lights decorating houses, through the cheesy and meaningful songs of the season, through unexpected tragedies, through heart-warming moments of memory and the heart-wrenching moments of loneliness that seem to pervade this season. Through all of this we have been carried along by the flood of God's mercy.

This flood has carried us to Epiphany — a celebration that draws to a close the 12 days of Christmas and highlights for us the visitation of the Magi (Wise Ones) to Bethlehem. Epiphany is about a different kind of flood — a flood of light from a star. A star that inspires a journey, points the way along the path and finally hovers over a specific place affirming to the travelers that, indeed, the journey has not been in vain — they have found the Holy.

Many years ago I worked on a series of collages called Looking for God in which I was trying to figure out how to show bits of the Holy that exist in things that are not traditionally thought of as religious — everyday things. In particular I focused on things that members of my family were doing that might have been Holy experiences for them in order to expand my own understanding of how we all interact with and encounter God in different ways. The basic structure of each image was the same — It was a small cutout image of the back of a kid wearing a baseball hat looking out onto an image that represented where I was looking

for God. I made one for each of my immediate family members. One of my sister's was studying theatre at the time, so her image was the kid looking at a script for a play. My father's was the most religiously literal as it looked at a steeple. Because of his calling as a pastor, I associate him with churches. For my mother, the child was looking at a mailbox because she was in the midst of reading through a lifetime's worth of collected letters that her mother had written in preparation to translate them into a memoir. For Becky, it was a cup of coffee because she has long believed in the presence of the holy in moments of taking a break and communing with others over coffee. And for my brother-in-law, it was a football end zone because he enjoys the history and continuing drama of college football. There were others, but this gives you an idea of what I was going for. I was stepping outside of my own experiences and understandings of where God was found and learning that God is found in many different and unexpected places because the world is full of many different people, cultures and communities and yet God is in relationship with us all.

The visitation of the wise ones is another exploration of this diversity. It is a story about the outpouring of God's promises into the world in and beyond the borders of the Jewish community. It is the sharing of Christ with the whole world. Here is a caravan of people from the East, without immediate connection to the Jewish community, who take note that something special is at work within that community, and they want to be a part of it. And as outsiders, when they need help on their journey, they go to Herod — the political leader of the day — not the leaders of the religious community. Herod, in this moment, plays mediator and

consults with the religious leaders and brings further directions back to the strangers. Herod sends them on their way towards Bethlehem with a request that they return the favor of this gift of information by coming back and letting him know where they end up finding the child so that he too may go and pay tribute.

However, as in any good drama, there are different motivations in play for Herod and the Wise Ones. Herod, who is primarily concerned about how this new king may impede on his earthly territory and power, is willing to sit back and wait for the Magi to do the work of looking for the child, he is not willing to engage in the journey. The Magi, on the other hand, are all about the journey. They are on a quest that is not about gaining or retaining earthly riches, but is about following a star that they believe points towards a significant event and they have come to offer gifts of earthly riches and homage to whatever may be found at the end of that journey.

And what they find at the end of that journey is an epiphany. Epiphany, by definition, is a manifestation, a striking appearance or from the ancient Greek a Theophany — a vision of God. The Matthew story has all of it. Jesus' birth is a manifestation; it is the mysterious incarnation of Immanuel — God with us. The star itself must have been a striking appearance in order to move a group of people to action — and these were astrologers — people who studied the stories and signs of the stars all the time and yet something about this star was striking enough to move them to take a journey of faith to an unknown place and seek out whatever that star was pointing to. And once they arrived and laid eyes on the child — it was an experience and vision of God. A vision that was only

received because they were willing to step out and take the journey; they followed a sign that pointed the way, asked for help when they needed it, and above all they just kept looking.

We too must keep looking for God. Even as this focused season of waiting and watching comes to an end there will continue to be signs of Christ's presence available to us to notice and follow if we so choose. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Epiphany celebration focuses on Jesus' baptism and the manifestation of his ministry. In the Anabaptist tradition, we elect baptism as a sign that we have chosen to take a journey of faith. We have accepted the call to live out that journey in whatever forms it takes. Part of choosing faith is choosing to continue to seek.

And the reward for seeking is finding. When the star finally came to a rest over the house of Jesus in Bethlehem the Magi were overjoyed for they had finally arrived at the place to which they had been lead — they went into the house and there they found Mary and Jesus and they fell to the ground in worship and honor. If we continue on the journey, we get to encounter God and when we recognize that a moment of encounter is at hand we are transported.

This congregation has been transported this year, in spiritual and physical ways. One of the big journeys has been the remodeling of our home church building, and when we needed a temporary home during construction, a star on our path hovered over this space, and we have met God here. We, like the wise ones, have offered ourselves and our gifts in worship and in return we have been blessed. Very soon our time of visitation will be over, and we will take the road

back to our own home. Like the wise ones, we will return home by a different path because we and our home have been changed by this time of transition, and the journey we are on now is a new branch of the path full of stars pointing us towards a multitude of new encounters with God.

Encounters that we will surely find if we keep seeking; encounters like those moments when even something small takes you by surprise and you are instantly transported out the mundane and into the Holy — it can be caused by anything, because God is in everything — a glimpse of a sunset, a kind word, a discomfort around injustice, a cup of coffee, the sight of a familiar space remodeled, a new friend, a connection not previously made now understood. In each of these moments, there is that flood of light washing over you. It is the epiphany experience, a glimpse of God, and perhaps if you were to look up there just may be a star hovering overhead.