

The Feast of the Epiphany
Christ and Grace
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Matthew
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*What if the magi were women?
They would have stopped and asked for directions, gotten there on time,
Helped deliver the baby Jesus, cleaned the stable and put down fresh hay,
Brought practical gifts and made a casserole for dinner!*

On this Feast of the Epiphany we hear the story in Matthew of the Magi's visit to Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Epiphany means manifestation...to make known. From the Greek, *epiphaneia*, literally the "shining forth" of God's glory in human form at the birth of Christ. The Epiphany is the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. An epiphany is any insightful or dramatic moment that instills new spiritual insight, vision, or perspective. An epiphany is something to be shared! These wise men had an epiphany and they did not stay home discussing it or form committees to study it further. They set out on a journey to find what God had for them. And isn't the beginning of a new year a wonderful time to begin a journey?

Wise men, magi, were from the East, Persia most likely, and they were astrologers. Often the birth of a new king was noted by studying the stars. Why they would travel so far and bring such gifts to an infant near Jerusalem is intriguing.

This story could be the fulfillment of prophecy, which is why Matthew includes it. Isaiah 60:1-6 speaks of a time when the light will come, when the Lord's glory will appear. It is a prophecy of great hope for the people of Israel, who have been in exile in Babylon, as they begin their return to Jerusalem. And they need hope because the city is desolate, in ruins. But Isaiah tells them there will be abundance and wealth, and that camels will come bringing gold and frankincense.

See how nicely it segues into Matthew's gospel, where there are people who need hope; where there is great poverty and an oppressive government dictated by Herod.

So the magi arrive, and while we might say they were bearing very inappropriate gifts for a baby, many have attached great symbolism to them. The gold is for royalty, a gift for this new king. The frankincense symbolizes divinity, alluding to the divinity of Jesus. Myrrh, a spice for burial foretells his death to save us. Other scholars suggest that the magi simply brought what they had that was most precious to them to give as gifts to the newborn king. Which may lead us to give some thought to what gifts we bring to God, to our family, to our church, and to our community? Perhaps we bring time or service? Prayer or presence? Tolerance or Encouragement? Maybe the best gifts we have are kindness, generosity, or love?

We are a lot like the wise men. All through our lives, God is constantly revealing God's self to us. How often do we take time to observe the stars at night? Or the myriad ways God appears in our daily lives? If we are paying attention, we will see signs of God all around us. Perhaps the sign is a trusted friend saying something to us that we need to hear, the words to a song at just the right moment, or an answer to a prayer. Perhaps, when it looks like what we had planned is not going to happen, God is revealing a new constellation to us that we have not yet recognized!

God is constantly shining light into our lives to help us on our journey. Sometimes the journey is long and hard. Sometimes the gifts we bear become heavy and hard to carry. But God is with us and as we use our gifts and share them with others who need them, our load is lightened and God's light is revealed to us and those around us.

Epiphany is a time to look for the gifts God gives us. God knows the gift we need, the star each of us needs to follow, to find ourselves in the presence of Christ. Perhaps it's something we need to add to our lives or subtract from our lives. Maybe it's a gift we are being called to cultivate and share with the world. Maybe it's an attitude adjustment, a bad habit to let go, or a new way to serve God's people in need.

As you return from communion, I invite you to take a star from the baskets on either side aisle. Each star has a word on it – a star word. So, without looking, choose a star and let the star word you receive be God's gift to you this Epiphany. May the light from your star word illumine your life in the year to come, drawing you closer to Christ. God has so many gifts of love to give us, so that we might share them with others.

As we look for the ways our star word appears in our lives each day, and follow its light on our journey through the year, we may see amazing things and receive beautiful gifts from God. Sometimes we may find it challenging to keep our gaze on our star word. This can become an opportunity for us to talk with one another about our gifts and our challenges as we journey through the year together. And it may be that our star words are just what we need to use to help others on their journey.

When we see Christ it is a moment of epiphany. We become wise men and women, not when we find the baby Jesus in the manger, but when we realize we have been found by God, and that the gifts we have been given in Christ are for sharing with the world.

The wise men returned by another road...because once you meet Christ, nothing is the same...you don't take the old road any longer, you find a new path. So come and receive Christ in the bread and wine, and then take a star from the basket and see where it leads you this year.

Amen.