

Sermon for Epiphany of Our Lord—Year C 2018
More Than a Star?

The wise ones asked King Herod—“*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews. For we observed his star at its rising . . .*”

These wise men from the East followed this star to Jerusalem.

And they will go on to follow it to Bethlehem.

They will be overwhelmed with joy when it stops over the place where the child was.

They came to pay homage, to reverence, worship and honor this child who has been born king of the Jews.

For [they] observed his star at its rising . . .

Some have said that star wasn't really a star.

One person said, “No natural star could have traveled such a course, nor could it have shone so brilliantly at midday and, furthermore, it stood still over the child.”

That person doesn't believe it was a star in the sky—and not because he's not a Christian or because he's an unfaithful Christian.

To the contrary he is one of the greatest preachers and bishops of the early Church—St. John Chrysostom of the fourth century.

He's not alone in his belief; others have made similar statements.

I confess, I've started to wonder too.

If this was a star up in the sky,
why didn't Herod see it?

Why didn't the chief priests and scribes see it?

Why isn't it documented by ancient astronomers
or recorded by the historians of the ancient world?

Even beyond those factual questions,

I believe there is more to this story than a star in the sky,
a rare comet, or an unusual conjunction of planets.

Surely the epiphany of the Messiah, the Christ, is more than a supernatural event given to a few people in a particular time and place. What about us?

Are we nothing more than inheritors of a story relegated to a second-hand experience of this divine light?

Is epiphany not also for us?

Don't you want to see this star?

I know I do.

And I don't say that as a demand for proof but as an expression of my yearning and seeking.

So, what if this star *wasn't* just a star?

Would that ruin the story, make it untrue, or leave it devoid of meaning or value?

I don't think so.

I think it would push us to consider a deeper meaning of epiphany.

I think it would reveal the divine light of Christ *in us* and *in our lives today*.

I believe it would open our eyes to the many epiphanies that are happening all the time.

Here's what I mean.

Most of us have been told or taught that an epiphany is that "aha" moment when we finally "get it," the light comes on, we have a new realization, or we've figured it out (whatever that might be).

Now I don't want to diminish those moments, but none of those understandings describe what is happening in Matthew's gospel.

The wise ones did not settle for a flash of insight—so, let's not settle for just a flash either!

Let's not deny ourselves the opportunity to participate in the beauty, grace, and power of what the Epiphany of Our Lord is really about.

The power of Christ's epiphany in today's gospel,
and in our lives, is its ability to evoke a response,
to evoke a response, to call forth something from within us,
to move us, to take us to a new place,
to open the treasure chests of our lives that we might give of ourselves.
Isn't that what we see in the wise men?
They were travelers on a journey.
They were searching and longing.
They saw the child with his mother.
They offered their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
All of these are the manifestation of Christ in their lives.

The epiphany of Christ didn't happen
only when the wise ones arrived at the place where the child was.
Observing "his star at its rising" was epiphanal.
Their journey to Bethlehem was epiphanal.
Seeing "the child with Mary his mother" was epiphanal.
Offering their gifts was epiphanal.
Going home to their own country by another road was epiphanal.

Yes, there was a light, an illumination,
a knowing (a discernment) that lead them,
a star that they followed, but it arose within them—not in the sky.
It was that deep kind of knowing that I have often thought of
and described as happening when you know that you know
but you don't fully understand or know how you know that you know.
I have a feeling you know, too, what I'm talking about.
I think you all have experienced that kind of knowing.
It's the kind of knowing that has power to move us
and take us to a new place,
to stir up within us an unquenchable longing,
to open our lives to another,
to let us give of ourselves,
and to recognize and adore the beauty of God's grace
and the divine life abiding in our human lives.

This kind of knowing does not exclude logic or reason,
but neither does it depend upon them.
It takes us beyond them.
This kind of knowing does not exclude feelings and emotions,
but neither does it depend upon them.
It takes us beyond them.
This kind of knowing does not exclude evidence and explanations,
but neither does it depend upon them.
It takes us beyond them.
This is epiphanal knowing—the rising of Christ’s light within us.
It’s happening all the time.
His star is always rising.

One of my own moments of epiphanal knowing was
the first time I bathed our newborn daughter.
As I looked at her, something happened.
I was taken beyond this ordinary bathing.
My heart was opened and I experienced and participated in
the beauty and miracle of the gift of life.
I knew, somehow, that I was holding the sacred,
the holy in my unworthy but loving hands.
I was observing his star at its rising.

Think about one of those days when nothing special happened,
but everything was just right.
Nothing was missing.
Nothing was lacking.
There was a fullness and satisfaction and you couldn’t explain why.
You only knew that you didn’t want the day to end
and you thought to yourself,
“My God, this is the perfect day. Thank you!”
You observed his star at its rising.
Perhaps you have had the experience of sharing with another person—
maybe your spouse, a friend, a pastor, or a therapist—something about
your life that you never told anyone else?

It was one of those secrets wrapped in shame, or guilt, or embarrassment
and it kept you bound to the past.
The other person listened without judgment.
They didn't laugh or condemn or ridicule.
They honored and respected you.
As you talked, a way forward opened up,
a way you never expected or thought possible.
You knew you were in some way moving to a new place in your life.
You observed his star at its rising.

How about one of those times when something begins to stir in you,
a deep longing, a passion?
Maybe it's a sense of calling or vocation,
a concern for others, an expression of compassion,
speaking out for justice,
caring for the oppressed, the poor, the hungry.
You feel it as an energy or drive.
You don't know where it will take you
and you're not exactly sure what you will do.
You only know that you must follow it.
You observed his star at its rising.

I could go and on.
Every one of you could tell these kinds of stories.
They are stories of painful and broken relationships
that are healed and put back together.
They are stories of making life changes you never thought possible.
They are stories of stepping into the fullness of your life,
becoming more real, more authentic,
and the only thing you can say is "yes."

They are stories of looking at a stranger,
one who is so very different from you, in every way,
and discovering that those differences give way to a deeper knowing,
a knowing that shows their life and your life

to be equally sacred, loved and created
by the epiphanal God revealed in Jesus Christ.
They are stories of connection and resonance in which you know your
life and all of creation to be one ongoing and never-ending epiphany of
Christ, the manifestation of God in and through human flesh and life.
In these and thousands of others like them,
we observed his star at its rising.

These are the moments that give us the courage to travel beyond the
borders and boundaries that usually circumscribe our lives.
Epiphanies are those times when something calls us,
moves us, to a new place and we see the face of God in a new way—
usually so human that it almost seems too ordinary to believe.

That's what happened to the wise men.
They began to see and hear the stories of their lives.
Something stirred within them and they began to wonder,
to imagine, that their lives were part of a much larger story.
Could it be that the one who created life,
who hung the stars in the sky, noticed them, knew them,
was calling them and wanted to abide in them?
Could it be that the light they saw in the sky was a reflection
of the divine light that burned within them, that burns within each of us?
What if the star was more than a star?

Wise ones of today, know that to consider these questions
is to begin the journey of following the great light of his star at its rising.
If we do take that journey that all wise ones take,
we may all travel different roads but the answer is the same—
yes, God does notice us, knows us, calls us and wants to abide in us.
His star is always rising.
And may we, our hearts overwhelmed with joy, kneel and pay homage
to the great light of his grace.