



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

JANUARY 3, 2021
EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Home by Another Way Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah, whom we heard earlier, was no palm reader or fortune teller. He could not see into the future any more than we can, but he was pretty good at looking around him, reading the present circumstances, then speaking about what was likely to happen. That is what prophets do. He acknowledged the difficult circumstances at hand which he labeled as darkness. Because of those circumstances, an even thicker darkness had settled on his people, that is to say: hopelessness, despair, depression.

Isaiah could be talking about us and our circumstances, don't you think? Last spring, a darkness suddenly settled over the entire world. And a thicker darkness enveloped us, a darkness of fear, separation, sudden and drastic change of life, and uncertainty about the future. We hear Isaiah loud and clear when he announces the darkness that has fallen upon the world.

We also hear him when he prophesies hope. In those familiar words we love to hear during Advent, Isaiah declares, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; *but* the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you" (Isaiah 60:1-2). So bright and dazzling and healing will this light be, he says, that not only will it lift your spirits, it will also draw other people like moths to a flame. We have to admit that when we hear those words in the weeks and days approaching Christmas, we get a boost and think, "Well, maybe things are going to be alright after all!" Isaiah spoke hopefully about what God does in the world.

This is where the beloved story of the magi fits right in. Listen to it again:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests

and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, 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. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1-12

Jesus' birth is marked by light in so many ways, primarily by this star which drew the magi from Persia to the little town of Bethlehem. You have to wonder, if the light was enough to draw these inquisitive men from a foreign land, how did the Jews miss it? How can we miss it?

Twenty years ago I wrote a story about this story. It was an attempt at a modern retelling of the end of the magi story. I did not speculate about what might have been the result of the magi choosing to avoid Herod and taking another route home to Persia. That is pretty clear. I speculated about what might result if we take a different route in life after we have seen and experienced Jesus' birth for ourselves. What might happen in our lives—or in the lives of other people—if we choose to travel a different way after Christmas?

According to scripture, for children in Judea, little boys two and younger, the consequences were deadly. Herod's wrath burned hot when he realized he had been duped. As our guest Wise Man commented during the Christmas Eve service, "No king has ever bowed down to another king." Herod never did bow down to the true King of the Jews. He never intended

to do so. As the magi rightly understood, Herod intended to eliminate any competition that might arise to challenge his authority. If the wise guys from Persia could dismiss him like the petty and insecure tyrant he was, then he would find the new king himself, dead or alive. He obviously preferred dead. What we know as the slaughter of the innocents ensued. A great darkness fell upon Israel and her people. But the light of God's glory and grace rose upon them in Jesus Christ.

This is Epiphany Sunday. As we know, an epiphany is a sudden insight or clarification, a fresh understanding that comes out of an experience of something rather ordinary. The epiphany in the story of the magi is that God intended the gospel for all people—including people who were not Jews. The magi were the first non-Jews to recognize the divinity of Jesus. In fact, apart from the shepherds, Simeon and Anna who met Jesus in the temple, and his own parents, the magi—foreigners—were the only other people to recognize that Jesus was divine until it was revealed over thirty years later at his baptism! Spoken of by prophets for centuries, long promised by God as a redemptive light for his people, it cannot be overlooked that non-Jews acknowledged Jesus long before many Jews did. That is an epiphany for certain. And that is mighty good news for us, given that few of us have Jewish roots.

There is another epiphany in the story. The sages from Persia took a different route home. Granted, a messenger from God warned them in a dream about Herod's intentions. Moreover, as officials of the court of Persia, they were sworn to show no allegiance to any Roman ruler.¹ Recognizing Herod's insincerity and calculating jealousy, they were not about to indulge the despot. Sadly, the innocent children and their families paid the price. There seems to be no justice in this story, but isn't that were Jesus always shows up, when justice is sorely lacking?

After Epiphany, which is actually on January 6, the twelfth day of Christmas, the celebration of Christmas will be done. It already is for most of us. Our trees and decorations have been taken down and put away. A new year has begun, one which we desperately hope will bring health and happiness to all of us. As we leave the Bethlehem of our Christmas celebration, as we leave the baby Jesus in the cradle, which way will we go? Will we simply do whatever we can to get back to the way things were before

¹Debra Dean Murphy, "Faith Matters: Epiphany after a Hard Year," *The Christian Century*, (December 30, 2020), 37.

Covid? Or will we take another route, find a different road back to what is familiar, and, along the way, acknowledge that something different, wonderful, astounding, and life-changing has happened to us so that we cannot go back the way we came. We have to go home by another way.

What ordinary thing has turned your head recently? Over the past year, many of you wrote eloquently and profoundly about what you have discovered since Covid changed our lives. You shared with us the things you have seen outside your window—things that caused you to look twice and listen again. Some of you didn't write, but you thought about these things. A number of you nodded your heads because you pay attention to what falls within your view of the world. What have you noticed about your life that you did not see before? What will you do about it?

The magi went home by a different way. For going on ten months now, we have been taking a different route to everything that we do. We're tired of it. We want it to be over. We don't want to take a different road. We want to walk down a familiar road and do familiar things with familiar people. We are tired of having to think about every single step we take.

Epiphany! We are not the first people on earth to have to adjust our lives, to take a different course in order to be safe and healthy, to find life that is whole and complete. The Jewish people had to change course many times throughout their history, each time following the light of God's leadership.

Epiphany! Yes, we have to take a different way, but if we know it leads us to a better place in life, we can enjoy the walk a little more. Maybe we meet some new people along the way or find some old friends on this new path. Maybe, just maybe, we will encounter some new perspectives and even discover that our minds have changed about some things. Maybe, just maybe, we will become more open to light shining through the darkness, enabling us to see God at work in the world. Maybe, just maybe, we will decide to follow that light and discover Jesus in ways we might never have imagined before now. Epiphany! The clouds are breaking. The light shines through. Emmanuel. God is with us!

January 3, 2021

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who became flesh and dwelt among us, we rejoice in the faithfulness you have shown to your people through the ages, and yet, as we celebrate Christ's coming once again, we continue to be surprised by the persistence of your love for us, the abundance of your blessings to us, and the extravagant demonstration of your grace in the sending of your Son. As we marvel at these most precious gifts, heal our hurts and calm our anxieties so that as we become restored in you, we might also be challenged and inspired to reach out in your name to a hurting world.

O Lord, as we look at our world, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the needs that we see. So many people are sick or grieving. So many at home and around the world live in poverty. So many suffer the loss of life and livelihood because of COVID or natural disasters or violence. So many more live in despair and loneliness and need the hope and light that you can bring to their lives. We pray for your guidance and healing and mercy. Teach us to be diligent in working to meet the needs of others, to be constant in our prayers, and to be faithful in sharing the light of your hope and peace.

As we stand at the threshold of a new year, we are grateful, O God, for new beginnings and second chances. May we be open to the new ways you are calling us to be messengers of the love and mercy we have received through the coming of Christ, reaching out with generous hands and compassionate hearts in whatever ways we can in these challenging days. Make of us lights to the dark places of our world that we might share the Good News of your transforming grace. At your table, may we be filled with your Spirit and empowered for the work to which you have called us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we worship, and by whose mercy we are sent out to serve, we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.

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