

Matthew 2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. ² They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.”

³ When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. ⁴ He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you’ve found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.” ⁹ When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

Dawning Light (Presence Beyond Ourselves)

Matthew 2:1-12

Happy Epiphany! Today we celebrate Epiphany. Epiphany really is Thursday, January 6 when the 12 days of Christmas are over, and we have the coming of the Kings, the Magi, the Wisemen. What do you make of this story? Did you hear anything new this time? Did you notice Joseph is not mentioned with Mary and Jesus? Did you see that the Magi found Jesus in “the house”? It’s not a stable or manger. Did you catch that Herod was troubled but also “everyone in Jerusalem”? What’s that all about? It is a fascinating story. These travelers follow the light to bring gifts to the Christ Child, for they had seen his light, his star. How do we relate to this story?

In 1972, a group of us got up early, before 5 am. We had an agreement that before we headed home from the Montreat Youth Conference we would climb Lookout Mountain in Montreat, NC in time to see the sunrise.

I stumbled to wake the others being as quiet as I could for some deadbeats, like the adults, did not see the necessity for waking at such an “ungodly hour”

as our advisors called it. But we knew differently. We knew God would be there. God would be revealed. God would be present. Now at the age of 16, I did not use such language, in fact we just thought it would be cool.

Nine of us teenagers grabbed blankets and headed up the mountain. We climbed in silence for 45 minutes, got to the top and settled in, all huddled together, facing east, watching, waiting, listening, looking.

First, a thin yellow line just lining the horizon. The yellow expanded and an orange band rested on the horizon. The shadows around us began to take faint color. The shapes now had details. We were beginning to see much more. As the sky erupted into light, yellow, orange, red, pink, we gasped at the beauty. Our silence could be maintained no more and one shouted, “Well done God!” And we all replied, “Well done indeed!”

The dawning light exhilarated us, filled us with new energy, moved in our very souls, filled us with new sight. As good Presbyterians, we broke into song, the doxology. “Praise God from whom all blessings flow!”

Here we were, 14-, 15-, and 16-year-olds standing at the top of a mountain singing praise to our Creator. What an Epiphany! What a revelation of God! We did not know how to act. We did not know how to respond. All we knew was that we were in the presence of God, presence beyond ourselves.

The descent from the mountain top took one third of the time our ascent took, and I am sure the whole conference center heard our laughter and our noise for we were bubbling over. We had been touched by God’s creative, rejuvenating power and we could be silent no longer. We had to share it with all who had not seen, with all who did not know this Epiphany.

Our text from Matthew today tells us of an Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to us Gentiles. The Magi from the east, astronomers most likely, had come for they had seen the Lord’s dawning light. Some call them kings, some call them wise men.

They carried exotic and expensive gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for an infant born miles away. In all honesty, the story did not make sense. Why would these strangers do this?

Diana Butler Bass reports historically, “The story of the three kings is not a pretty tale; it is a pretty radical — and even political — one. In the ancient world, gifts were rarely exchanged between people of unequal status.

“There was no way that Jesus and his family could ever repay the debt of gratitude they would incur by accepting such generous presents.” She continues, “When it happened, such gifts came with burdensome political expectations. Peasants might offer a gift to a king to demonstrate fidelity, request a favor or plead for mercy. Gifts were used to secure power and privilege for benefactors, the very definition of quid pro quo.”

But when the magi brought gifts to Jesus, they turned gift-giving on its head. The travelers brought their gifts with no expectation of repayment, with no debt of gratitude attached. Gifts were freely given and received in response to love, not in anticipation of reciprocity.

What wonder! What surprise! Obligation is gone, replaced by astonishment. Repayment is neither possible nor necessary.

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They knew how to act. They knew how to respond. They knew they were in the presence of God, presence beyond themselves.

What could we give God who broke through in the early morning dawning light 50 years ago but our song, our praise? And then I think, each and every day since then, God has broken through the night and given us a new day! What gifts do I have to give God today other than my praise?

As Howard Thurman wrote: When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner, To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among brothers [and sisters], To make music in the heart.

(The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations)

Epiphany, the time to celebrate God’s Presence beyond us with shouts of praise and acts of compassion.

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