

SERMON WRITER

RESOURCES FOR LECTIONARY PREACHING

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Epiphany

Year A

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[Title](#)

[Exegesis](#)

[More Sermons](#)

[Hymns & Hymn Story](#)

[Sermon in a Sentence](#)

[Children's Sermon](#)

[True Story](#)

[Upcoming Weeks](#)

[Scripture](#)

[Sermon](#)

[Thought Provokers](#)

[Bibliography](#)

A THOUGHT ON PREACHING: When Queen Victoria complained to Gladstone that there were not many good preachers, he replied, "Madam, there are not many good anything."

TITLE: The Aha Experience

SERMON IN A SENTENCE: Epiphany includes the Aha message that (1) God loves us and (2) God loves other unworthies too.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2:1-12

EXEGESIS:

EPIPHANY: The word *epiphany* means an appearance or manifestation, particularly of a divine being — or an illuminating discovery, especially one that comes unexpectedly.

Epiphany marks the first manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles. It signals that God loves Gentiles as well as Jews — that God's plan of salvation includes Gentiles too. That might seem a moot point now — of academic interest only. The church has embraced Gentiles for centuries. Most Christians today are Gentiles. Isn't this a dead issue?

It would be a dead issue if Epiphany were only about the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. That is hardly the case, however. Epiphany is much more. It is a celebration of the breaking down of dividing walls — the end of hostilities between groups of people (Ephesians 2:14). Epiphany challenges us to reconsider all the people whom we see as outside the pale — outside the boundaries of God's love. It challenges us to abandon our tribalism (racially, nationally, denominationally, etc.) and to expand our tents to welcome even those whom we would prefer not to love. It is a burning issue, because loving those outside our tribe is difficult—but Christ makes it possible. That is the Epiphany message.

We celebrate Epiphany on January 6 (or the nearest Sunday). Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost were the great holy days for the early church. Christmas came along later.

VERSES 1-12: OVERVIEW

"Matthew's sublime story of the adoration of the Magi has often been better understood by poets and artists than by scholars, whose microscopic analysis has missed its essence" (Hare, 12). What a wonderful insight! The difference is one of attitude. The poet and artist approach scripture with wonder and affection — with the heart. The scholar approaches scripture systematically and analytically — with the head. Both have their place, but this story shows how Christ enriches those who bring him their hearts. The Magi came with joy in their hearts to see the Christ child, and God allowed them to see wondrous things.

Matthew tells a very different story than Luke:

- Instead of shepherds, Matthew gives us Magi from the East.
- Instead of a stable, Matthew takes us to Herod's palace.
- Instead of a manger, Matthew shows us gifts fit for a king.
- Instead of angels, Matthew tells us of dreams.

Although, at our Christmas pageants, we group shepherds and wise men together around the manger, the shepherds came from nearby and the wise men from afar. The wise men's visit probably took place long after the shepherds had departed. Mary and Joseph remained in the vicinity of Bethlehem and Jerusalem until Jesus had been circumcised and presented in the temple (Luke 2:22-38). Mary also needed time to recover from the delivery before traveling to Nazareth. Presumably the wise men visited during the latter part of Mary and Joseph's visit to Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Matthew includes a number of dark elements in his story:

- Joseph resolves to put Mary away quietly (1:19).
- Herod kills babies in an attempt to do away with the newborn king (2:16-18).

- Joseph and his family flee to Egypt to escape the murderous king (2:13-15).
- Joseph and family return to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem (2:19-23).

There are a number of important parallels between the stories of Moses and Jesus:

- Pharaoh ordered that all Hebrew baby boys should be killed (Exodus 1:16, 22), just as Herod does (2:16-18). The baby Moses was at risk, just as is the baby Jesus.
- Moses was saved by the intervention of Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:1-10), just as Jesus is saved by a dream warning Joseph and Mary to flee (v. 11).
- As a young man, Moses, fearing for his life, fled from Pharaoh (Exodus 2:15).
- The Lord told Moses, "Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead" (Exodus 4:19), just as an angel will say to Joseph, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead" (Matthew 2:19-20).

"When Matthew 2 is taken as a literary whole and read against the background of Exodus 1-2, Jesus emerges as a Moses-figure.... With the various stories in chapter 2 Matthew sought to express a continuity between Moses and Jesus" (Harrington, 49). However, while Moses (at God's direction) saved Israel from its slavery, Jesus will save the world from its sins.

Another Old Testament allusion has to do with the story of Balak and Balaam in Numbers 22-24. There are at least four parallels between that story and the story of the Magi:

- A wicked king (Balak)
- A pagan soothsayer (Balaam)
- God's intervention to foil the king's plan
- A star (Numbers 24:17).

"What is a metaphor in Numbers 24 becomes a sign in Matthew 2: A star appears in the heavens which signifies the birth of the 'star ruler' of the Jewish people" (Gardner, 45).

VERSES 1-2: WHERE IS THE CHILD?

*1*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men (Greek: *magoi*) from the East came to Jerusalem, *2*asking, Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at it's rising, and have come to pay him homage."

"In the time of King Herod" (v. 1a). This is Herod the Great. His sons, Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip, and Herod Antipas, will succeed their father upon his death in 4 B.C. Herod the Great was, in many ways, a truly great king. He kept the peace. He built the Temple. He was sometimes generous.

However, Herod was genuinely paranoid — murdering rivals, real or imagined. "He murdered his wife, Mariamne; his mother, Alexandria; his oldest son, Antipater; as well as his sons Alexander and Aristobulus. Augustus, the Roman emperor, once said that it was safer to be Herod's pig (Greek: *hus*) than Herod's son (Greek: *huios*). Approaching death, Herod had a group of elite citizens of Jerusalem arrested and imprisoned, with orders that the moment he died they were to be killed so that some tears would be shed when he died" (Augsberger). The Massacre of the Innocents (2:16-18), modeled after Pharaoh's killing of Israelite babies (Exodus 2:1-10), is thus very much in keeping with Herod's character.

"after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea" (v. 1b). Jesus' birth is recounted in Matthew 1:18-25. The more

detailed account is found in Luke 2. For information on Bethlehem, see comments below on verse 5.

"wise men (*magoi*) from the East came to Jerusalem" (v. 1c). These *magoi* come to Jerusalem, because the capital city is the logical place to look for a king.

Magoi, "originally the title of a Persian priestly caste who played an important role in advising the king, was applied more widely to learned men and priests who specialized in astrology and the interpretation of dreams, and in some cases magical arts" (France, 66). Boice says that the word *magoi* means "great ones" (Boice, 33). We know little about these *magoi* from the East:

- They were probably members of a priestly caste in ancient Persia, possibly followers of Zoroaster.
- We call them kings, but Matthew calls them *magoi*, which we transliterate "Magi." The word "kings" might come from Psalm 72:10, which speaks of the kings of Tarshish rendering tribute and the kings of Sheba and Seba bringing gifts. See also Isaiah 60:6, which tells of the people of Sheba bringing gold and frankincense. That is reminiscent of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon (who, like Jesus, was a son of David) and her gifts of gold, spices, and precious stones (1 Kings 10:1-10), but the Isaiah verse is future-oriented and points forward to the gifts which these *magoi* bring to Jesus.
- We think of these *magoi* as astrologers because they are observing stars (v. 2), and astrology was considered a learned occupation. However, from the perspective of the Jewish people, *magoi* look to the stars for answers that legitimately come only from God.
- The word *magoi* is also found in Acts 8:9-24 and 13:6-11, where it is translated magician or sorcerer. From the perspective of the Jewish people, *magoi* work magic using demonic powers. They are far from the kingdom of God, which makes these *magoi* especially useful for Matthew's purposes as he shows how the Messiah brings salvation even to Gentiles — even to Gentiles who might be magicians or sorcerers.

As a side note, astrology and horoscopes are still popular. The fact that Matthew treats these *magoi* kindly does not mean that astrology or horoscopes are legitimate. They constitute an alternate religious system, incompatible with Christian faith. God is in control — not stars. God's primary means of revelation are prophets, scriptures, sacraments, and Son — although God can use even stars to guide us to Christ.

- Most significantly, the wise men are Gentiles. Matthew's Gospel is very Jewish, but he introduces these Gentile worshipers at the beginning, preparing us for Jesus' last words to his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19 — the Greek word translated "nations" is *ethne*, which also means "Gentiles"). We are struck by the contrast between these Gentiles, who follow the star to Jesus, and the chief priests and scribes, who know the scriptures but who do nothing to seek out the Messiah, whom they have determined to be only five miles away in Bethlehem (v. 5). God's people ignore the Messiah, while pagans eagerly seek him out.

Matthew will treat favorably a Gentile Roman centurion (8:5-13) and a Gentile Canaanite woman (15:21-28). He also includes women, including women of questionable repute (Rahab), in Jesus' genealogy. He makes it clear that the barriers that separate people from each other do not separate them from God's love. As the writer of Ephesians will later say, "he...has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Ephesians 2:14). That work began at the nativity. Epiphany challenges us to consider who we might consider to be unworthy (welfare mothers, kids with baggy pants, smokers, Muslims, etc.) and how we, the church, might reach out to them in Christian love.

We think of the wise men as three in number because they give three gifts, but they could be any number. Storytellers named them Melchior, Caspar (or Gaspar), and Balthasar, but those names are not found in scripture but "first appear in a mosaic in a 6th-century church in Ravenna, Italy" (Encarta).

"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (v. 2a). For the longest time, I assumed that these wise men were asking Herod for directions — an unwise move, given Herod's reputation for paranoia and violence. However, a more careful reading shows that they came asking for directions (v. 2) and Herod heard of it (v. 3).

Matthew doesn't say that they asked Herod for directions.

Anyone who has traveled with someone who will not stop to ask directions can appreciate the humble wisdom of these *magoi*, who did ask.

This title, "King of the Jews," will reappear at the end of this Gospel as Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (27:11) — and when the soldiers mock him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" (27:29) — and as a sign posted on the cross as the criminal charge against him, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (27:37). Matthew obviously considers it important to establish that Jesus is, indeed, King of the Jews.

"For we observed his star at its rising" (v. 2b). Scholars have tried to identify the star that led the wise men. Halley's Comet would have been visible in 11 B.C., and Jupiter and Saturn came together brightly in 7 B.C. However, there has been no agreement regarding the star, nor is there likely to be. This star does not behave as stars do, but stops over the place where the child is (v. 9-10). This is a supernatural rather than a natural occurrence — a sign from God, who has power even to stop stars in their tracks.

"and have come to pay him homage" (Greek: *proskunesai* — from *proskuneo*) (v. 2c). Matthew uses this word *proskuneo* thirteen times. "The word itself can indicate either homage paid to a person of authority or the special homage known as worship which we offer to a deity. Here the two meanings appear to merge" (Gardner, 46-47).

VERSES 3-6: IN BETHLEHEM OF JUDEA

*3*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; *4*and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. *5*They told him, *In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

6'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.' "

The differences between Jesus and Herod could not be greater.

- Jesus was born in a stable; Herod lives in a palace.
- Jesus is a helpless infant; Herod possesses great power.
- Jesus will prove to be a man of great compassion; Herod is cruel and violent.

"When King Herod heard this, he was frightened" (v. 3a). Why would a king fear a baby? Perhaps it is paranoia. As noted above, Herod murdered any potential rival to his throne — even members of his own family. Perhaps his paranoia is fed by feelings of illegitimacy. Many people in high positions feel like pretenders, wondering when their legitimacy will be questioned and their power stripped from them. Herod has more reason than most to feel illegitimate. He is of Arab descent, and rules at Rome's pleasure. His father gained power by supporting Julius Caesar, and was named procurator of Judea by Caesar in 47 B.C. His family ruled the area for a century and a half. The Jews, who want a king of their own, resent Herod. Given half a chance, they would overthrow him. Even though Herod is not a Godly man, he would worry about a God-ordained king born to take his place.

Hauerwas makes the point that we have difficulty understanding why the birth of Jesus would be perceived as a political threat, because we see politics as public and religion as private. "The Gospel of Matthew, however, knows no distinction between the public and the private. Jesus is born into time, threatening the time of Herod and Rome" (Hauerwas, 38).

"and all Jerusalem with him" (v. 3b). "All Jerusalem" would seem to include two groups. The smaller group, the power elite who owe their power to Herod (including some religious leaders), fear losing power if Herod is replaced with another king. The larger group, the general population, fear what Herod might do in a murderous rage. It is also possible that Matthew is implicating the Jewish people, even at this early stage, of opposition to Jesus. They will later share in the guilt of the crucifixion, but Matthew may be linking them with Herod even at the beginning of the story.

"calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people" (v. 4a). These are Herod's wise men — members of the Sanhedrin, those who rule over the religious realm. In verses 3-4, Matthew gathers together the people who will serve as Jesus' opponents through his lifetime — all Jerusalem, the chief priests and the scribes.

- Caiaphas is high priest (Matthew 26:3, 57; John 18:13, 24), but his name is closely linked with Annas, his father-in-law, who may have preceded him in that office (John 18:13; Luke 3:2). We will see Annas and Caiaphas again as Jesus is being prepared for crucifixion (John 18:13, 24).

- The scribes are experts in Jewish law. We will see the scribes frequently in Matthew's Gospel, where they will be in conflict with Jesus on nearly every occasion.

"he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born" (v. 4b). The wise men have identified the baby as "the child who has been born king of the Jews" (v. 2a), but Herod equates that description with the Messiah.

Herod was the son of an Idumean father and an Arabian mother. While his parents had adopted the Jewish religion, Herod (considered a half-Jew by most Jews) would need help from Jewish scholars to understand the intricacies of the faith.

"In Bethlehem of Judea, in the land of Judah" (v. 5a). Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem, was David's birthplace. Matthew identifies it as Bethlehem of Judea to distinguish it from Bethlehem of Galilee, located a few miles north of Nazareth. Bethlehem is a small town, a lowly place, an appropriate setting for Jesus' humble birth. However, it is also proud, having been the birthplace of David, Israel's greatest king.

It is worth noting that King David's origins were also humble. He served as a shepherd, a lowly occupation. When Samuel asked Jesse, David's father, to bring his sons so that Samuel might determine which one God had chosen to be king, Jesse did not even think to include David, his youngest. It was only when Samuel had disqualified the other sons that Jesse sent for David. David's early fame came when, unable to manage a man's armor, he faced Goliath armed only with a slingshot. But he became Israel's greatest king. Humble beginnings — a great end! Now this humble but proud town gives Israel its Messiah.

"for so it has been written by the prophet" (v. 5b). The prophets quoted are Micah (5:2) and Samuel (2 Samuel 5:2). Matthew has a higher interest in the fulfillment of scripture than any other Gospel writer.

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah" (v. 6a). Micah 5:2 speaks of "Bethlehem of Ephrathah," which people in that time and place would have understood as Bethlehem of Judah. Matthew changes Micah's wording to place additional emphasis on Jesus' Judean heritage (France, 72).

Here Matthew establishes not only that the prophets foretold Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, but also that the religious establishment has reason to understand what is happening and yet does nothing about it.

"are by no means least among the rulers of Judah" (v. 6b). Matthew makes a significant change in Micah's wording at this point. Micah spoke of Bethlehem as "one of the little clans of Judah," but Matthew changes that wording to "are by no means least among the rulers of Judah." His intent was "to show that the fulfillment of this prophecy has transformed Bethlehem from a relatively insignificant town into a city of great honor.... Discerning Jewish readers would have known the wording of the original text and would have recognized that Matthew's addition was not a mistake in quoting the Scriptures but an interpretative explanation" (Blomberg, 64).

The wise men got their first clue from nature, seeing a star in the East. The information from that source, however, was incomplete. They need the scriptures to inform them more fully. They must come to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship, to be led by the scriptures to Bethlehem. "On the other hand, simply knowing the scripture is not enough to bring one to authentic Christian worship. The chief priests and scribes know the Bible, but they miss the Messiah" (Long, 19).

"for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel" (v. 6c). This is the point of the verse from Micah — that a ruler will come from the small, insignificant town of Bethlehem — a town that, as a consequence of Jesus' birth, will no longer be insignificant.

VERSES 7-8: BRING ME WORD

7Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then 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."

"Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared" (v. 7). Herod is concerned about the exact time, because that information will help him to track down the baby.

"Then he sent (the wise men) 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'" (v. 8). Herod wants to kill the infant who poses a danger to his throne. Rather than sending his troops to Bethlehem, which might alert the people of Bethlehem and allow the baby and family to escape, Herod decides to involve the unsuspecting wise men in his treachery.

Herod will give orders to kill all the children in Bethlehem two years old and under (v. 16), drawing the lines broadly enough to be sure of removing the baby who threatens his throne (2:16-18). This suggests that Jesus might be as old as two years when the Wise Men appear at his home. Herod's efforts will prove futile, however, because God will warn both the wise men and Joseph, who will flee to Egypt with his little family (2:13-15).

The treachery that Jesus will endure later in his life begins in his infancy, as does the hypocrisy of his enemies.

VERSES 9-11: THEY OFFERED HIM GIFTS

9When 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 (Greek: oikan — house) where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage (Greek: prosknesan — from proskuneo). Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

"When they had heard the king, they set out" (v. 9a). Bethlehem is only six miles (ten km) from Jerusalem, so it would not be difficult for the wise men to find it, even without the assistance of the star. It is quite possible that they started in the right direction before seeing the star that would then appear to them.

"and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising" (v. 9b). Matthew gives us no idea whether this star might have been visible to other people as well as the wise men. Given Herod's concern and the

involvement of all the chief priests and scribes (v. 4), it would seem that Herod's people would have noticed a visible star and would have followed it to see where it would lead. It seems likely, then, that God has made this star visible to the wise men and invisible to Herod's people.

"until it stopped over the place (*oikan* — house) where the child was" (v. 9c). Stars do not stop in their orbits. This is not a natural phenomenon, but a sign from God. The Magi find Jesus in a house (v. 11). Matthew's reference to a house differs from the manger of Luke's version of Jesus' birth story (Luke 2:1-20). There are at least two possible explanations.

- First, it is likely that the manger area where Jesus was born (Luke 2:7) was part of a house, and the Magi may have come to that house.
- Second, a number of scholars think that a considerable time, as much as two years (see comments on v. 16), has elapsed since Jesus' birth. If that is the case, this could be a house where Joseph took up residence with his little family sometime after Jesus' birth.

"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy" (v. 10). Note the contrast between the joy of these Gentiles and the fear of Herod and Jerusalem. The people who should be ready to receive Christ with great joy are instead afraid. Those least likely to care anything about a Jewish Messiah receive him joyfully. During his ministry, Jesus will turn many assumptions on their ear, and he begins this work in his infancy.

"On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother" (v. 11a). There is no mention of Joseph here, although chapter 1 recounted his genealogy and his obedience to the angel's command. He will reappear at 2:13, where the angel will tell him to take his family to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous plans — and Joseph will once again obey the angel's command.

"and they knelt down and paid him homage" (*proseknesan* — from *proskuneo*) (v. 11b). The word *proskuneo* is the word that you would use to picture ordinary people paying obeisance to a king. These great men see in this baby someone much greater than they. They kneel to Jesus, "unwittingly anticipating that day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:10-11)" (Hare, 13).

"they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (v. 11c). The gifts seem odd for a baby. We expect baby clothes and toys. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh, however, speak to Jesus' future.

- Gold is a gift fit for a king.
- Frankincense is used in temple worship (Exodus 30:34) — a gift fit for a priest.
- The high priest uses myrrh as an anointing oil (Exodus 30:23). It is also used to prepare bodies for burial, and Nicodemus will bring a mixture of aloe and myrrh to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39-40).

Psalm 72:10-11 speaks of kings rendering "the king" (Psalm 72:1) tribute and kneeling before him and offering gifts. Isaiah 60:1-6 mentions gifts of gold and frankincense. "The fact that these OT parallels refer to kings offering gifts is responsible for the later idea that the magi were themselves kings" (Hagner).

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh are not only expensive gifts, but they are also portable. Very soon (2:13) an angel will tell Joseph to flee Herod. Joseph will not be able to take many possessions, but he can carry gold, frankincense, and myrrh to sell along the way and thereby finance the journey to Egypt. Perhaps these gifts are God's way of providing for the journey that lies ahead.

VERSE 12: HAVING BEEN WARNED IN A DREAM

12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road (Greek: hodos).

Try as he might, Herod cannot derail God's plan for the salvation of the world. The Herods of this world are no match for God — or God's people. God enlightens these wise men with regard to Herod's intentions, so they avoid Herod on the way home.

The word translated "road" is *hodos*, a word that Jesus will use to describe the "narrow road" (7:13-14) and "the way of righteousness" (21:32). Bruner finds here "the truth that encounter with Christ means... 'going another Way'" (Bruner, 50).

CHILDREN'S SERMON: Finding Joy
By Lois Parker Edstrom

Picture of earth taken from space available at:

http://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/image/planetary/earth/apollo17_earth.jpg

Have you ever seen a satellite blinking and moving across the night sky? It looks just like a star, but this kind of satellite is made by men and women and sent into space where it circles the earth. Many satellites orbit our earth continuously and some are no bigger than a beach ball.

Satellites are used for many different things:

- Some look at the weather and warn us about storms.
- Some relay television programs and telephone messages.
- Some give us information about the universe.

Satellites take pictures of things on earth and are able to locate mountains, rivers, deserts, cities and even individual buildings. With help from a satellite and a computer you can find your house or school and see what it looks like from space.

Satellites help travelers find their destinations. Airplane pilots, boat captains, and drivers of cars are able to receive information from satellites so they know their exact location almost instantly.

When Jesus was born there were no such things as manmade satellites. There is a story in the Bible about wise men who used a star to help them find what they were looking for.

These men saw a star rising in the east and they had heard that the "king of the Jews" had been born. They wanted to find him. They followed the star until it stopped over the place where the child, Jesus was. "They were overwhelmed with joy."

When they saw the child with his mother, Mary they knelt down and worshipped him and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The wise men found joy when they found Jesus and that same joy is available to each one of us today when we accept God's love. Find your joy!

SERMON: [\(Top of page\)](#)

January 6 is Epiphany. In the church we celebrate Epiphany every year, but lots of people don't know what it means. Epiphany is difficult even to type. My fingers always get snarled when I try to type it — E - P - I - P - H - A - N - Y. The folks who designed the QWERTY keyboard (the one that most people use) really made it hard to type Epiphany.

My dictionary defines an epiphany as an "unexpected manifestation." I prefer to think of an epiphany as a great discovery — an "Aha!" experience. Cartoonists picture an epiphany with a light bulb above a cartoon figure's head. That says it pretty well. An epiphany is a light suddenly switching on in our head.

When I was in high school, I heard an unusual epiphany story in a science class. It had to do with Archimedes, an ancient Greek scientist. Archimedes had his epiphany — his Aha experience — when he lowered himself into a bathtub and noticed how the water rose higher in the tub. He raised himself from the water and saw how the water got lower in the tub. It suddenly dawned on him that there was a scientific principle at work — a principle that he could use to predict the buoyancy of a ship. Archimedes got so excited that he ran out into the street shouting, "Eureka! Eureka!" In his excitement, he forgot to put on his clothes. He was running down the street in the buff, shouting "Eureka! Eureka!" In my high school days, many years ago, that seemed like a pretty racy story.

Did you ever have an Aha experience? Most of us have. My Aha experiences usually come after I sleep on a problem that I have been trying to solve. I'll be working on something, and I'll bump up against problem after problem. Finally I'll give up and go to bed. Then sometime in the middle of the night I'll wake up with the solution. The solution just comes to me. It is an epiphany — an Aha experience — but I'm careful not to run out into the street shouting, "Eureka!"

The Epiphany that we are observing today has to do with the story of the Wise Men as told in the Gospel of Matthew. It was an Aha experience for them as they followed a star to the baby Jesus. It was an Aha experience to follow a star that nobody but God could have put in the sky. It was an Aha experience to see the star stop over the house where Jesus was. It was an Aha experience to see the baby.

Matthew says that when they saw Jesus, they "knelt down and paid him homage" (2:11). They approached Jesus as if he was a king and they were ordinary men. They knelt — just as they would have done in the presence of a real king. They brought expensive presents — just as they would have brought to a real king. Their actions reflected their belief that they were, in fact, in the presence of a real king. They were in the presence of the one who was "born king of the Jews" (2:2).

I don't know to what extent they understood this, but their encounter with Jesus was God's way of telling them that salvation was for them too — not just for the Jews. If they understood that — if they "got it" — that was their best Aha experience.

But this was also an Aha experience for the readers of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew was Jewish, and he was writing for Jewish Christians. In the early days of the church, you couldn't become a Christian unless you first became a Jew. It took awhile before the church began to open its doors to Gentiles.

But here, at the very beginning of this Gospel that written by a Jew for Jews — Matthew tells this story that shows that Gentiles have a stake in Jesus' birth too. The good news of God's love isn't limited to Jews, but is available to Gentiles too. That would have been quite an epiphany — quite an Aha experience — for the Jewish Christians who were the first people to read Matthew's Gospel.

And just in case these readers missed the significance of this story, Matthew then tells the story of a Roman centurion — another Gentile — who had great faith. In fact, Jesus said of this Gentile, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (8:10).

And then Matthew tells about a Gentile woman who had great faith (15:21-28).

And then, to ice the cake, Matthew ended his Gospel with these words. Jesus said:

"Go therefore and make disciples of ALL NATIONS,
baptizing them in the name of the Father
and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to obey
everything that I have commanded you" (28:19-20)

Did you catch that? "Make disciples of ALL NATIONS." The Greek word that is translated "nations" is *ethne* — which also means Gentiles.

So what I am telling you is that all through his Gospel, written for Jews, Matthew is emphasizing that God has brought Gentiles inside the tent. He is saying that Jesus came to save Gentiles just as he came to save Jews. He is saying that Jesus is for all of us. And if we can ever get that through our heads — that Jesus is for all of us — that will be a real Aha experience.

It isn't easy, you see, to believe that Jesus came to save US. Oh, it's easy enough to believe that Jesus came to save the WORLD, but it is much more difficult to believe that Jesus came to save ME. I'm not good enough. I would like to be a good Christian, but I still do bad things. Is it possible that Jesus has come to save ME? Maybe he tried, but has he succeeded? It is hard to believe, sometimes, that he has.

Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever wonder if this Jesus stuff applies to you? Most of us wonder. Most of us feel unworthy. When it comes to religion, most of us feel like outsiders looking in through the window. We try to hide it, but we wonder if God really loves US.

In one of his books (*Six Hours One Friday*), Max Lucado relates a story told originally by a teacher of underprivileged children. The teacher told of a nine-year-old girl whose name was Barbara. Barbara was always quiet. She never spoke — never. When the other children sang, Barbara was silent. When the other children laughed, Barbara sat quietly. The teacher could see that Barbara was listening, but she couldn't get her to talk. Barbara never spoke a word.

Then one day the teacher told the children about heaven— what a wonderful place it is — how God prepared heaven for those who love him.

Then, much to the teacher's surprise, Barbara raised her hand. (NOTE TO THE PREACHER: Slow down. Capture the wonder of this moment.) It was one of those precious moments that teachers pray for. The teacher acknowledged Barbara and waited to hear what she would say. This is what Barbara said. She asked, "Is heaven for girls like me?" (PAUSE)

Have you ever felt like that? "Is heaven for girls like me?" "Is heaven for boys like me?" "Is heaven for men like me?" "Is heaven for women like me?"

Epiphany's answer is YES!!! Yes, heaven is for people like you. Heaven is not only for people LIKE you — but heaven is for YOU! God created heaven for YOU! Yes, I understand that you are not good enough! Yes, I know that you do bad things! If you weren't a sinner, you wouldn't need Jesus. Jesus didn't die on the cross to save people who didn't need him. Jesus died on the cross to save YOU!

Billy Graham put it this way. He said:

"Jesus stopped dying on the cross
long enough to answer the prayer of a thief.
He stopped in a big crowd one day
because someone touched the hem of His garment;
and He'll stop to touch your life
and change you,

and forgive you."

That is the hardest thing for us to understand. It is the hardest thing to believe. But if we will allow ourselves to believe it, it is the most wonderful Aha experience imaginable. It lifts a terrible burden from our shoulders. We can become truly joyful when we finally believe that God loves US — when we finally believe that God loves ME! Let me assure you that God does, indeed love US. God does, indeed, love YOU.

And then there is one more Aha experience in this Epiphany story. It is this — that God loves the rest of the people too — including your neighbor who plays the trombone — including every ne'er-do-well and every scumbag and every derelict — including people whom you might prefer that God NOT love — rapists and murderers and such. It's hard to believe that God could love people like that. It's hard to believe that God could love rapists and murderers — but if we can get our heads wrapped around that idea, it will be a great Aha moment for us.

One of the great things about believing that God loves rapists and murderers is that it becomes easier to believe that God loves US too.

So as we begin this new year, let us start by believing that God loves us — even us. And our neighbor — even our neighbor. And our enemy — even our enemy. And then let us respond to that love by loving ourselves — and our neighbor — and our enemy. Amen.

MORE SERMONS ON THIS TEXT: You might also find the following sermons helpful.

Pastor Steven Molin, "What Our Gifts Say about Us"

<http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/Molin/Matt/Matt%2002.01-12,%20GiftsSay.htm>

The Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger, "Follow the Star"

<http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/Leininger/Matt/Matt%2002.01-12,%20FollowStar.htm>

TRUE STORY:

See the Archimedes story and the Max Lucado story in the sermon above.

THOUGHT PROVOKERS: ([Top of page](#))

You are not accepted by God because you deserve to be,
or because you have worked hard for Him;
but because Jesus died for you.

• Colin Urquhart

* * * * *

The Lord is loving unto man,
and swift to pardon,
but slow to punish.
Let no person therefore despair
of his own salvation.

• Cyril of Jerusalem

* * * * *

Whosoever walks towards God one cubit,
God runs towards him twain.

• Jewish proverb

* * * * *

Wherever there is a man who fears God
and lives the good life,
in any country under the sun,
God is there, loving him,
and so I love him too.

• Gerhard Tersteegen

* * * * *

Who is the mysterious spirit that heals us,
that binds us together,
that rebuilds broken families,
that heals the psychotically estranged,
that evokes a tenderness and forgiveness and hope in us?

Who is the Mysterious Spirit
that conceived the delicate wonder of childhood,
the sensuous warmth of mature beauty,
the gnarled gray wisdom of age,
the endless mystery of life and death, tears and laughter?

In a sense, I do not know,
but I sense his presence,
feel his power
and I have learned to trust his love.

• Edward Stein, scientist

* * * * *

HYMNS:

HYMNALS

Baptist Hymnal (BH)
Chalice Hymnal (CH)
Collegeville Hymnal (CO)
Common Praise (CP)
Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)
Gather Comprehensive (GC)
JourneySongs (JS)
Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)
Lutheran Service Book (LSB)
Lutheran Worship (LW)
Presbyterian Hymnal (PH)

The Faith We Sing (TFWS)
The Hymnal 1982 (TH)
The New Century Hymnal (TNCH)
United Methodist Hymnal (UMH)
Voices United (VU)
With One Voice (WOV)
Wonder Love and Praise (WLP)
Worship & Rejoice (WR)

GATHERING:

Angels from the Realms of Glory (BH #94; CH #149; CO #206; CP #143; ELW #275; GC #358; JS #202; LBW #50; LSB #367; LW #50; PH #22; TH #93; TNCH #126; UMH #220; VU #36; WR #189)

As with Gladness (BH #117; CH #173; CO #229; CP #160; ELW #302; GC #374; JS #224; LBW #82; LSB #397; LW #75; PH #63; TH #119; TNCH #159; VU #81; WR #236)

The First Noel (BH #85; CH #151; CO #211; CP #139; ELW #300; GC #377; JS #198; LBW #56; PH #56; TH #109; TNCH #139; UMH #245; VU #91; WR #229)

Also spelled The First Nowell

PROCLAIMING:

Arise, Your Light is Come (BH #83; ELW #314; TNCH #164; VU #79; WOVS #652; WR #231)

Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light (BH #114; CP #147; LSB #378; PH #26; TH #91; TNCH #140; UMH #223; WR #202)

Brightest and Best (CH #174; CO #233; CP #159; ELW #303; GC #379; LBW #84; LSB #400; LW #86; PH #67; TH #117-118; TNCH #156, 157; WR #235)

From a Distant Home (PH #64; UMH #243; VU #89; WR #238)

Also known as De Tierra Lejana Venimos

I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say (BH #551; CO #453; CP #508; ELW #332, 611; GC #646; JS #476; LBW #497; LSB #699; LW #348; TH #692; TNCH #489; VU #626)

Once in Royal David's City (CH #165; CO #212; CP #123; ELW #269; GC #372; LSB #376; LW #58; PH #49; TH #102; TNCH #145; UMH #250; VU #62; WOVS #643; WR #183)

There's a Song in the Air (CH #159; UMH #249)

Twás in the Moon of Wintertime (CH #166; CO #218; CP #146; ELW #284; GC #361; LBW #72; PH #61; TH #114; TNCH #151; UMH #244; VU #71; WR #213)

Also known as Huron Carol

We Bring the Frankincense of Our Love (PH #62)

We Three Kings (BH #113; CH #172; CO #232; GC #373; JS #218; PH #66; TH #128; UMH #254; WOVS #646; WR #233)

What Child is This (BH #118; CH #162; CO #215; CP #137; ELW #296; GC #380; JS #209; LBW #40; LSB #370;

LW #61; PH #53; TH #115; TNCH #148; UMH #219; VU #74; WR #184)

What Star is This (GC #378; JS #211; PH #68; TH #124)

SENDING:

In the Bleak Midwinter (CO #193; CP #122; ELW #294; PH #36; TH #112; TNCH #128; UMH #221; VU #55; WR #196)

O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright (CH #105; ELW #308; LBW #76; LSB #395; LW #73; PH #69; TNCH #158; UMH #247; WR #230)

Jesus Shall Reign Where're the Sun (BH #587; CH #523; CO #508; CP #383; ELW #434; GC #482; LBW #530; LSB #832; LW #312; PH #423; TH #544; TNCH #300; UMH #157; VU #330; WR #341)

HYMN STORY: We Three Kings

The giving of gifts is one of the most enduring traditions of Christmas. It has its origins in the story of the Wise Men who followed a star to the place where the baby Jesus lay in his manger. They presented him with gifts — gold and frankincense and myrrh — odd gifts for a baby but appropriate for the baby Jesus. Gold was a gift fit for a king, and Jesus was born king of the Jews. Frankincense was used in by the priests in worship, and Jesus would become our priest — the one who enables us to come to God. Myrrh was used for anointing bodies for burial, and would be used to anoint Jesus' body after his death. So each of these gifts had a symbolic meaning for Jesus' life and death!

But I am convinced that these gifts also had a very practical and urgent purpose — one that the Wise Men could not have imagined. Because Herod feared the baby born king of the Jews, he would soon send his soldiers to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem. God warned Joseph to take his little family and flee to Egypt lest Jesus be killed. Joseph got up in the middle of the night, gathered his family and a few possessions, and fled. They stayed in Egypt until the danger had passed. How could Joseph, a simple carpenter, afford to make such a trip? How could he provide for his family in a foreign land? Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were expensive, and could be easily sold. They were also compact and portable, which meant that Joseph could take them along on the journey. I believe that God inspired the giving of these particular gifts as a way of providing for Joseph and his family on their journey.

The hymn specifies that there were three kings. Matthew doesn't specify the number, but we have guessed that there were three because of the three gifts.

Speaking of gifts, Jesus was God's Christmas gift to us — the greatest gift that God could give. The Wise Men brought the best gifts to Jesus that they could offer. The question is what we can bring to Jesus as a gift. Our time, talent, and money are three candidates, and they are all important. But the gift that Jesus really wants is the gift of our hearts. That is the best gift that we can offer Jesus at Christmas — or anytime!

SCRIPTURES FOR UPCOMING WEEKS: [\(Top of page\)](#)

We follow the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) and use Sunday texts only. When possible, we use supplementary mailings to accommodate denominational differences.

NOTE: For the Old Testament readings, I will provide only the exegesis.

Jan 13	Baptism A	Matt. 3:13-17 AND Isaiah 42:1-9
Jan 20	Epiphany 2A	John 1:29-42 AND Isaiah 49:1-7

Jan 27 Epiphany 3A Matt. 4:12-23 AND Isaiah 9:1-4
Feb 3 Transfiguration Matt. 17:1-9

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[\(Top of Page\)](#)

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