

# “Epiphany: A Season of Call” by Marjory Bankson

Epiphany

January 8, 2023

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On the liturgical calendar, Epiphany or 12<sup>th</sup> night, marks the end of Jesus' birth story – signaled by the visit of wise men from afar. In many cultures, 12<sup>th</sup> Night, or 3 Kings Day, is the real celebration that involves the exchange of presents, reserving Christmas for the birth of the Christchild.

I grew up thinking that Epiphany was when we took down Christmas decorations, because we always included the wise men in our Christmas celebration two weeks earlier. Now I see Epiphany as a season of call!

**At Seekers**, the manger scene is gone from our front window – the wise men and their fuzzy camel packed away with the shepherds and the baby Jesus for another year. All during Advent and Christmastide, I watched the small changes that Brenda made each week to tell the story as people pushed past our lighted window on their way to the Metro. It was a quiet

offering – like Godly Play – on a busy street. I saw people stop and stare, wondering what scenes and stories they carried to that archetypal tableau.

For me, the wise men are the most intriguing figures – their rich robes and precious gifts a strange anomaly in the simple manger scene. Only Matthew includes these visitors from another land and another culture. It makes me wonder why they are there. And what meaning might they have for us?

**Historically, about the time** that the Gospel of Matthew was being written down, an uprising in Jerusalem was crushed by the Romans, and the Second Temple completely destroyed except for one wall which still stands today. By 70 AD, the center of Jewish life had been wiped out and most Jews fled to other lands.

For Jews attracted by Jesus' teaching, the wise men, resonant with Isaiah's prophetic hope, would have symbolized the promise that SOMEDAY the rulers of this world would recognize the special relationship that the God-of-all-creation had with the Jewish people.

**For Gentiles** among the early followers of Jesus, Matthew's inclusion of the wise men probably suggested a different, more inclusive message – that ALL people, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, were to be included in the kingdom of God, either here on earth or later, in some heavenly realm. As Gentiles wrestled with their understanding of Jesus as a crucified Messiah, the wise men would have symbolized a shift in the Jewish covenant to include those who saw the light of Christ from afar. Gentiles would have embraced that message in Matthew's account.

**By the 4<sup>th</sup> century**, as the Christian church began to get its doctrinal house in order, Matthew's gospel was an established part of the canon. In the ancient world, the stars were fixed on a solid crystalline sphere around the earth, and those who

could read the stars were revered in many cultures. The wise men perhaps suggested a higher order of spiritual leaders that would transcend the rule of local princes and kings. That they were informed by heavenly signs fit with an emerging theology of divine guidance and authority as catholicism took on its more institutional and hierarchical form.

I've been reminded of that heritage by the funeral of Pope Benedict this week – by the pomp and circumstance surrounding his death even though he wished for a simple burial. No matter what we think of his influence or his red shoes, we are reminded by the thousands wanting to pay their last respects that the pope, whoever it is, continues to touch people's lives all over the world. For many, he (and it is always a he) is THE wise man from a far country.

Which brings me to the present day and my own experience of these three wisdom figures.

**My favorite artifact** from the first Seekers mission trip to El Salvador in 1996 is this wooden fish, which I found in a vendor's basket on a street in Santa Anna. [hold up]

On one side, we see three wise women, dressed in cloaks, following a prominent star toward the church steeple in a pueblo-type village. They look like peasant nuns. On the other side, we see three farmers, two men and one woman, bringing gifts of food and music across rock-strewn land toward the same village. It's a simple /graphic/ piece of folk art painted by some anonymous Mary in the midst of a war-torn country. I looked, but there were no others like it.

For me, this has become an icon, and every time I hold it, I feel connected to the painter who made this radical message – of holy women on foot instead of rich men on camels. Still, they are clearly wisdom figures.

The image of these three peasant women also reminds me of the final words in the Ferlinghetti poem that we worked with

during Christmas – how Christ climbed down from that bare cross and stole into some anonymous Mary’s womb ... in the craziest of Second Comings. All week I’ve been pondering Sharon Lloyd’s comment about those lines – that she’d grown up thinking that the Second Coming was to be an apocalypse at the end of time, and not something that is happening spiritually every day, again and again, in the most ordinary way.

Could that be the wisdom of God? Something we are being called to see right here? Right now? Has the spirit entered your life in a new way? An unexpected way? Do YOU have a new call coming?

**Let’s look at the star.** A Jewish listener would be reminded of Moses leading their liberation from

slavery in Egypt with the presence of God as a “pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of flame by night.” Their midrash tradition would have filled in the meaning of the star as God’s presence from other biblical stories.

The wise men were apparently astrologers, as some translations say. I grew up thinking that astrologers were to be lumped with fortune-tellers, horoscopes and ouiji boards, but ancient astrologers were actually the scientists of their age, disciplined by years of study and guided by their knowledge of constellations – that sure and steady energetic framework of the cosmos.

Throughout the ancient world, astrologers were considered essential advisors by many rulers. We must simply wonder why Matthew added them to the story. As Deborah noted in her InwardOutward reflection yesterday, the wise men were NOT so wise as to avoid alerting Herod that a new king was being born in his land, but they were wise enough to listen to their dreams and return home “by another way.” That is, they paid attention to their dreams and recognized the warning from God. We might call them mystics. Clearly they were open to

unexpected guidance.

Certainly they have a symbolic purpose, enlarging the story of Jesus' birth with universal proportions, and now that we know that the universe is actually a dynamic, ever-changing field of exploding stars and shifting energies, we are left to marvel at the MIRACLE of enough stability on this planet to hold the blanket of atmosphere close enough to sustain life as we know it.

In that light, these mysterious wisdom figures take on new meaning. They give us a living link between the cosmic energy patterns holding our universe together, and the fragile wonder of a new human life. On one hand, they could read the stars to navigate trackless terrain. On the other hand, they kneel beside a rough manger, to honor a newborn baby. They speak to us of the cosmic Christ, alive in every part of the intricate web of life AND precious in the particularity of each life. They become a dynamic image of relationship and interconnectedness – and an image of call for each one of us to some part of that intricate web of life.

If we can heed their message, we may be able to do the same thing: to celebrate the miracle of life itself AND, at the same time, acknowledge the dreadful convulsions of nature being caused by our human actions. Right now, the natural world is crying out – with floods and freak snowstorms, with drought and melting ice-caps, with floods of refugees and collapsing species – to tell us that there are limits to growth. Limits to population. Limits to comfort and convenience. Limits to consumption and waste. Limits to overproduction and extracting resources. Can we shift our thinking from consumption to creativity? Is there a call here for us?

Most of US live in safety and comfort, far from the terror of fires or floodwaters. We may be quite satisfied with the level of travel and consumption that we have chosen, and so we shift

our subliminal worries to watching the cynical circus in the House of Representatives – a fairly safe reminder of the political chaos that permeated the writing of Matthew's gospel. We could fall into the trap of depression and despair, feeling powerless to change the situation that we see every day on our screens. We could let ourselves grow numb to the plight of our planet or the needs of our neighbors.

Or we can kneel beside a rude manger with the wise men, struck by the miracle of life itself, and let the awe and wonder of new birth permeate our souls with new life, new hope, new promise – like Vander Moller-Seat.

For me, the particularity of one child suggests that I must look for ONE THING being born in me right now. Instead of worrying about the many problems and issues that vie for my eyes and ears, I must look to the star in my heart for the next right thing.

If we let the Christmas story quicken new life in us, we too can hear the call to return home by another way – a way that God will show us – a way that is not determined by the patterns and rules of our secular society or the literal logic of Christian nationalists.

**At Seekers**, Epiphany is a hinge event on the liturgical calendar. This week begins a season of call, attention to the whispery trail of some quiet star in your heart and mine, which will lead us to the work that is ours to do in the dynamic evolution of God's continuing creation story.

Like the wise men, we may be called to leave the safe havens that we have known and set off on some inner or outer journey with one or two others. Or we may be in the midst of a puzzling dream which will show us another way home to the heart of God.

Let me close by reading our reflection paragraph as you ponder what your next call might be:

*Maybe you will not be called with the coal held to your lips,  
the rush of wings of ambitious angels covering you. ...*

*But maybe you will be called by fallen mustard seeds and  
open-eyed dreams.*

*Maybe you will be called by the ordinary and the striking,  
the places where your heart catches more than once...*

*Maybe you will know that your call is no less real because it  
comes*

*with seeds in your hand and the taste of fruit in your mouth,  
with a sound so soft it could have just been the breeze,  
but wasn't.*

*– Laura Martin*

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**May it be so. Amen.**