

Home by Another Way

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Epiphany Celebrated

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Today we celebrate Epiphany with the story of three wise men who came with their gifts to honor a new king of the Jews. It's a simple story, perfect for the finale of a Christmas pageant.

My favorite image of Epiphany is this carving of a fish which I bought from a street vendor in Guatemala. It shows three well-dressed women with increasingly-large halos as they approach a gold-domed church and a very bright star overhead. On the other side, common people carry baskets of food toward

the same gold-domed church. I love the mixture of messages here. The wise women drew me in and at least the ordinary folk are on the same fish, if not the same side.

In Guatemala and other Latin American countries, Three Kings Day is widely celebrated with gifts for children, special foods and joyful family gatherings – like Christmas morning in North America.

In the U.S., if we mark Epiphany at all, it's generally the time to take down our Christmas decorations and pack away the creche for another year. Not really something to celebrate except where Epiphany marks the beginning of Mardi Gras, as it does in New Orleans.

In the church liturgical year, Epiphany marks the end of Christmastide, the 12 days of Christmas celebrating Jesus' birth narrative. Epiphany also celebrates the revelation of Jesus as *the Christ* for Gentiles as well as for Jews. That's part of what I want to explore with you today.

Only Matthew's gospel includes this story of the Magi where it amplifies the promise of a Messiah found in Isaiah. Scholars suggest that Matthew was written for diaspora Jews who were scattered beyond Judeah. From our perspective, their actions also invite us into the whole story of Jesus as an expression of God's intention for all human life.

Webster's dictionary tells us that the word *epiphany* means a surprising revelation or a burst of insight often associated with light. As I pondered this story, searching for something meaningful to offer today, four basic elements of our spiritual journey stepped out of the shadows. They are call, gifts in community, action or purpose, and reflection. We might imagine those as four cardinal elements of a cycle that we experience again and again. It was an *epiphany* for me and

maybe for you, too.

First, the star as call. The wise men noticed a star moving against the stable pattern of constellations in the night sky and they undertook a perilous journey to follow its lead. That moving star was both a call and a promise of some mysterious kind of accompaniment from the heavenly realm.

The understanding of call as a North Star for purpose and direction has been a guiding principle in Seekers, part of our Church of the Saviour heritage. We began our journey as a separate community with our call to be church supporting ministry in daily life rather than having a single mission. It makes our communal worship and mission group membership a priority. Call guides our giving and shapes our identity.

We also encourage every member of Seekers to be asking “What is my call now?” – knowing that one’s call will shift and change over time. Elizabeth O’Connor, a patron saint of Church of the Saviour, used to say that we can expect a change of call every seven years as our physical bodies and relational circumstances change. That’s an interesting exercise, even if you’ve done it before. As I begin my 13th 7-year cycle, it’s become a star in my heart as I ponder my call now. To celebrate Epiphany, we might ask:

- What is the star of call in my heart as I begin this new year?

Second, the gifts. The wise men brought special gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In ancient times, those gifts had a spiritual meaning: Gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense, a fragrant incense, as a symbol of deity, and myrrh, an embalming oil, as a symbol of death. Taken together, the gifts proclaim Jesus as *the Christ* who is both mortal AND divine. The men and their gifts are interlaced as a figurative trinity, but we may need to stretch our

imaginations to identify with these desert travelers.

Here at Seekers, we offer our gifts of time, energy and money as an expression of gratitude and sacrificial giving. We give ourselves and, at the same time, we are shaped by our relationship here. Our gifts represent our commitment to this community as a body of Christ, doing the work that we can accomplish together and supporting the outward journey that we each undertake.

In the text, we also catch sight of internal gifts. The travelers go first to King Herod to ask about where the king will be born. Herod called his wise men, the learned men of the Temple, and asked where “the Messiah” was to be born. Notice the clear link to Isaiah’s prophecy.

Matthew says Herod was frightened by their visit “and all Jerusalem with him.” It makes me wonder – Why they were frightened? Why not glad and rejoicing? Were they afraid of revolution and replacement? Of God’s judgment?

We don’t know, but we do see the Magi were not distracted or deterred. They continue to follow the star, **taking their gifts to the right place**. That detail seems important. They didn’t offer their gifts to Herod, who was, in fact, the king of the Jews at that time. Their North Star, their call, provided them guidance about where to offer their gifts. Today, my questions about gifts include:

- Where am I being called to offer my gifts of time, energy and money? What distractions must I ignore or set aside?

Third, the action. The wise men offered their gifts on bended knee. In their fine robes, they knelt in a smelly barn to honor the child, fulfilling their outward mission with this sign of humility and grace. Interpreters see their posture

ashonoring Jesus as the *Christ* for a wider world, not only the Messiah for Jewish liberation. Their actions signal a revolutionary message that began to separate Christians from traditional Judaism.

At Seekers, the inner work of one's spiritual journey is to find the place of service that is truly ours to give. There will always be plenty of need and requests for help. No individual or community can meet them all. But wise ones give us sage counsel: let call be our guide. Together, we can offer our gifts at the right time in the right place, knowing that others are also being called to offer their time, energy and money in other places. We need to be clear about who and what we will serve. Call is the guide for right action. In response, we might ask:

- Where am I now called to action? Does that require a surrender of control or power? Are there activities I need to release? Something I need to embrace more fully?

Finally, the fourth element is reflection. The wise men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and so they went home by another way. They listened to their inner guidance and changed their course of action.

For the inward journey of reflection, wise men and women pay attention to dreams, to intuitions, to advice, mistakes, projections and shadow work. In other words, the inward journey leads to self-discovery and greater clarity about who we are at this time and in this place. It can lead to shedding old protective behaviors and finding "another way" toward our ultimate home.

Reflection means stepping back from the ways we've managed our lives to this point and ask with the contemplative perspective of Christ, "What is the next right thing? Do I need to move forward by another way?" We might ask:

- How do I reflect on my life? My actions? My gifts and limits?
- What do I need to add or subtract to make room for what's new?

In retrospect, Epiphany is a perfect time to revisit these four elements of our spiritual journey: the star as call; tangible and relational gifts evoked by traveling together; where and how to take action, and spiritual reflection on the whole process – perhaps to make space for a new call.

There are, of course, many other observations we could make about this story. The wise men were a temporary community for a single task. They traveled by night, at ease in the dark. It was a wilderness journey, full of danger and hardship. The journey must have been physically demanding, emotionally exhausting and often discouraging. How did they keep hope alive? We can save those for another time.

As we enter the new year, I hope each of us can find the star that will lead us to the right place where we can fully and freely offer our gifts and our service, and may we guard those silent spaces of reflection so we can hear the guidance that is always there – how to keep following the star and when to go home by another way.

May it be so. Amen.