

Natalie W. Bell  
 January 7, 2024  
 Epiphany Sunday

***Epiphany***  
***Matthew 2:1-12***

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi<sup>[d]</sup> from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we **observed his star** in the east<sup>[b]</sup> and have come to pay him homage.” <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah<sup>[c]</sup> was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*<sup>6</sup> ‘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<sup>[d]</sup> my people Israel.’ ”*

*<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the magi<sup>[e]</sup> and learned from them the exact time **when the star had appeared.** <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, **went the star that they had seen in the east,**<sup>[f]</sup> until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped,<sup>[g]</sup> **they were overwhelmed with joy.** <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

***Today is Epiphany Sunday, also known as Wise Men Sunday.***

Next to Easter and Christmas,

Epiphany is one of the ***oldest Christian holy days.***

It falls on January 6<sup>th</sup>—the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas.

Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Jesus to the ***Gentiles,***

Especially the wise men who followed the star to Jesus.

When the wise men saw that bright star and followed it,

***They were having an epiphany---***

A revelation about a newborn King,  
one that would change their lives forever.

According to Miriam-Webster an *Epiphany* is  
*a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something, an intuitive grasp of reality, an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure.*

***Can you think of a time when YOU had an epiphany?***

A sudden realization or revelation?

What about an epiphany from God?

Ever seen, or felt, or experienced a revelation?

We believe that this beautiful story of the wise men and the star,  
Is our story.

Is an *integral part of the larger story of faith* in Jesus.

We are called to *be like those wise men,*  
seeking our Savior.

We are called to *pay attention* to God sightings, and revelations, and follow.  
The Epiphany story is *our story.*

We are also called to *pay attention to the majesty and mystery of Creation--*  
like that Bethlehem star.

We believe there really was a brilliant phenomenon in the sky then—  
a special star that led them to Jesus.

The Bible says they saw a star at its rising.

They were likely studying the stars,

Watching the constellations, and change, and movement in the sky,

So they noticed a new bright star when it appeared.

***What was that phenomenon in the sky*** around the year of Jesus' birth?

It was probably *Jupiter and Saturn* coming together--

It would have been a bright and brilliant star!

In fact, in December 2020 many of us saw a star like this—

It was called *the Christmas Star.*

It was especially bright on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020,

the winter solstice, the longest night of the year.

It was the appearance of *Jupiter and Saturn side by side* in the southwest sky.

It had been nearly 400 years since those planets

passed *so* close to each other in the sky,  
and nearly 800 years since the alignment of Saturn and Jupiter occurred at night,  
allowing nearly everyone around the world to witness the “great conjunction.”

<https://www.nasa.gov/feature/the-great-conjunction-of-jupiter-and-saturn>

So, *why would it be important to believe in something like the Christmas star?*

Why not just have a story about men from the East who just heard about Jesus’  
birth and went looking for him?

Why a star?

Why something in the natural world?

This week I was reading about *Celtic Christianity*,  
and their reverence for Creation.

In fact, Celtic Christians call *Creation the Big Book* of faith,

And the *Bible is known as the Little Book* of faith.

Both books are necessary for Christian faith, and they inform one another.

We are called to “read” both, and listen to them, in stereo.

Rev. Dr. John Philip Newell, *The Light Within All Life*, Day 1, Jan 6, 2013.

American Christians tend to *focus solely on the Little Book—the Bible*.

But what if we are *missing* some of God’s message,  
when we ignore the Big Book of Creation?

Aren’t we doing ourselves and our world a disservice when we focus **ONLY**  
on the *Written* Word of God?

What happens when we overlook the *Word of God in Creation*?

After all, Genesis says that *God spoke* things into creation!

And it was all declared good by God.

So we can and should see the *value of Creation*,  
just like we see the value of *God’s written Word*!

I think some have been *hesitant to do this, and focus on Creation*,  
because that feels like a non-Christian path.

Some are afraid of things like pantheism,  
where God and creation are the same thing—God is all and all is God.  
That’s **NOT** what we believe as Christians.

But we **DO** believe that *God created the universe and all that is in it*,  
and that creation is good, and valuable,

and God continues to speak to us through it!

***Creation is good.***

***It's important.***

***It has something to say!***

Celtic Christians see Creation and the Bible,  
as being in ***conversation*** with one another.

They see the value of the Big Book AND the Little Book coming together,  
And how we ***need both for a healthy relationship*** with God.

If we have ***ONLY have the Big Book of Creation***, like some other religions,  
We can miss the intimacy of God's relationship with us in Scripture.

But if we have ***ONLY the Little Book of the Bible***,  
we miss the vastness of God's universe,  
and the power of God that is found in all life.

I wonder when ***YOU have heard from God in the Big Book?***

Ever had a ***God-sighting in nature?***

Ever been ***overwhelmed*** by God's power and majesty on a mountain, or at the  
shore, or in the forest?

***That is the Big Book***—the Word of God in the created world.

Just like the ways God speaks to us in the ***written Word*** of the Bible.

What's so amazing about the Epiphany story and the wise men  
is that it involves ***BOTH the Big Book of Creation---the star***,  
And the ***Little Book of Scripture***---Herod consults the prophecies when he sends  
them to Bethlehem to find baby Jesus.

Both books were necessary.

Both books led them to the revelation of God in Jesus' birth.

You know, they were also led by God,

when they were ***warned in a dream*** to return home another way.

That wasn't written down.

It was just God speaking to them as they slept!

Amazing, right?

Do we pay attention to our dreams?

Or to only what we can read on a page?

*This is such a powerful story, in so many ways.*

It's also significant that it was NOT just one wise man.

They were watching and waiting and following, *in community!*

We don't even know for sure that it was just 3 of them, only that there were 3 gifts.

I wonder, *how do we watch and wait for God TOGETHER today?*

How do we listen to God in creation and in the Word—together?

How do we wrestle with God's Word to us, as a church community?

You know something else powerful in the story is how God is revealed,

*Beyond our boundaries.*

These were wise men from the East—not Jews.

They were Gentiles, possibly from Persia (modern-day Iran).

They didn't believe in the God of the Israelites, and yet they were paying attention and following the signs of the living God!

So often *we think that OUR tradition and culture and way of life is all that we need.*

We believe that we have God's light and revelation, right where we are.

But this story *challenges that assumption.*

It reminds us that there is *light to be found, beyond our boundaries.*

Beyond our traditions.

Beyond our culture and way of life.

We need to *follow the stars—wherever* they take us.

We need to *pay attention* to God's power—*wherever we find it!*

This is a *THEME throughout the Bible---*

we often see *Gentiles and non-Jews* as heroes of faith.

The Syro-Phoenician woman in the Gospels and her amazing faith.

The Samaritan who stops to help the injured man on the side of the road.

Ruth, a Moabite.

The truth is, *we NEED each other.*

We need to go beyond our own boundaries.

to know God and God's power.

*We CAN'T do faith and life ALONE---*if we try that, we miss out on so much of what *God is doing, and who God is.*

So this story of *Epiphany, is OUR story.*

It is our *inspiration, and challenge.*

How will we pay attention to the Big Book of Creation  
and the Little Book of Scripture?  
How will we *follow the signs* that God puts in our hearts and minds?  
And how will we do that *TOGETHER*?

When we *pay attention* to the God-sightings, the signs,  
When we *follow the stars* that God sends our way,  
the result is one thing: *JOY*.

The Bible says that these wise men were *overwhelmed with joy* –  
when that star led them to *Jesus*.  
The *same thing can* happen to us, today.  
We can follow the light God puts in our lives—and *find joy*.

That's the *Good News of Epiphany*.  
And today I want us to *take that Good News home* with us,  
And think about it all year!

Today on this *Epiphany* Sunday, I want to *give each of you here*  
A *word*, written on a *star*, in honor of the *Star of Bethlehem*.  
They are all *faith-words*, words of inspiration,  
Words that come from God's Word,  
each one of them is applicable to every one of us.

If you are not here in person, you can **still get a star**,  
*just contact me or stop by my office*—  
**OR**, you can take a faith-word that comes to your mind right now, and use that.  
Write it down.

It could be any WORD that draws you to God—like *faith, grace, prayer, hope, courage, trust...any word* that brings you closer to God.

Then I encourage you to *reflect* on this word, *all year long*.  
Take it to heart,  
*And believe this word is* for you in this new year.

Put it somewhere *prominent*, to see every day.  
Take time to *think about* it.  
Look it up in the *dictionary*.  
Look up in the *Bible*.

Allow it to *spea*k to you, even if at times you resist it.  
Let it remind you of God's *presence in your life*.  
And know that it is a *GIFT* from God that will *keep on giving to you*.  
It's something you can *hold onto*, in times of trouble.

These words are little *epiphanies*,  
*light* shining in the darkness, like a *star of hope*.  
They inspire us keep going, and *to give* back, out of gratitude for God's gifts.

Now *let us stop and pray for God* to use these words in our lives:

*Loving God, we acknowledge that we are not always ready to receive your gifts. You have given us these words to bring us closer to you. Help us to be open to the gift that you offer us. We do not fully understand what this word might mean for our faith, but we receive it with gratitude and pray that your Spirit will enable us to live into our word with intention and faithfulness. May we look back on this day a year from now, having learned from this word and this gift. This we pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.*

Friends, may we all follow the Star, and receive the good news.  
And all God's people can say together, Amen.