



Epiphany of Our Lord
January 9, 2022

"Rising Light"

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*"And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."
(Matthew 2:12)*

Let us pray: Everlasting God, the radiance of all faithful people, you brought the nations to the brightness of your rising. Fill the world with your glory, and show yourself to all the world through him who is the true light and the bright morning star, your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Well, the three kings from the Orient have come following a star to see this baby Jesus. They have arrived on the scene now and we pause today to hear the story of the Epiphany from Matthew's gospel. Matthew is the only gospel writer who includes this story. But it is part of our Christmas Story as we celebrate the new born king. This king is feared by a ruthless ruler in Herod who plots later on to eliminate this new king. This king has wise men coming from the east following

a star and to pay homage to this King of the Jews. These so called wise men are not Jews but gentiles who have come to seek out this miracle by doing what they are known for and that is reading the stars. God uses these travelers to shine light on whom the real king is and that is not Herod.

The Epiphany of our Lord actually falls on January 6, according to our church calendar. That was last Thursday but Christ Lutheran has traditionally moved the Epiphany to the following Sunday so that the celebration is not forgotten. No, the wise men did not show up on Christmas as the shepherds did. They had to travel a great distance to get to the baby Jesus. I have to stand here and say once again that the manger scenes with the wise men in them are not accurate. But that they came at all is what is memorable to this complete story of Jesus the light of the world. As you can see, the wise men and their animals have been moved to the manger scene here in the front of the altar. They are no longer on the window sill but in place.

These wise men, or magi as they are called, came bearing gifts for this new born child who is king of the Jews. They arrive in Jerusalem seeking out this king only to have an encounter with Herod who becomes concerned about this new king and that this new king may take away his rule. He plots to eliminate this new king and when the wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they

left for their own country by another road. Why were they warned? Well later in the story Herod sends out soldiers to eliminate all of the new born boys under two years old. This brutality is in stark contrast with the birth story of the real king who has come in peace. That's enough about Herod's brutality and self-centered life.

But it is something to pay attention to that Herod finds out about this new born king from strangers and not the priests and scribes. They do answer Herod's question about where this took place.

The wise men bring gifts to honor Jesus. The symbolic meaning of each gift tells part of the story of who Jesus is: gold for a king, frankincense to honor the divine, and myrrh for burial. The gift of gold for a king is not hard to understand, but frankincense and myrrh are not so well known in certain contexts. The gift of myrrh reminds us that Jesus' birth, like every birth, begins a journey toward death. This infant king is born to die, and it is for our sake. At the same time, the healing properties of myrrh remind us that in Jesus' death and victory over the grave, there is healing for all our ills.

The wise men discern signs from God who uses these astronomers to come to Bethlehem to see this phenomenon. The Epiphany star was a sign from God that the magi knew to follow. So ask yourselves what are the signs that God

sends our way for us to follow? God has not stopped giving signs to the world and to each one of us. God gives us stars to follow that lead us to Jesus. Have you ever stopped and discerned what signs God has put right in front of you? Were you able to follow them? Were you able to recognize them? I often wonder about the people we encounter who are looking for help. When we approach someone on our way into a store or driving in or out of a shopping parking lot, is this a sign from God to help them?

This example may be very simple but know that God still sets up stars for us to follow and observe as they rise. But there is one other piece of this gospel lesson that caught my attention. “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” I wonder how many times we have been warned or told to travel down another road. It may be easy to just stay the course in life but there has to be times when we are challenged to go another way. That challenge has been right in front of us for these past many months. We have adapted to the road we normally would travel on but now we are challenged to adapt to a different road to travel.

The wise men honor what they were told after traveling so far as they understood the evil they encountered in Herod. Their lives have just been changed by their encounter with the king of the Jews and by going home by

another road shows the truest part of who they were. When we are challenged to travel by another road, we may find it a little bit uncomfortable. But you see that is how God works. God works to challenge each one of us to seek out the signs or the stars and then seek out the meanings for each one of us.

What is the other road we may be looking at as the people of God in this place? Your journey has been a long one from those many years ago when the first church was built to the early 1950's when you moved up here on this hilltop. You have journeyed down many paths in your history and now you are challenged by this new normal we are experiencing and even into the future you will have roads to travel. Will you be able to step up to the challenges that are coming? Will the roads you will travel be done so in the name of Christ? So many questions and not many answers right now but the signs will be there for you to follow. You will have to seek them out and find that star that is going to be set before you.

Epiphany is about celebrating how God is revealed in Jesus. This King of the Jews who came into the world to save the world is revealed to us in many and various ways. The Prophets of old tell of the kings coming to honor this child and that was the key to the priests and scribes telling Herod where the king of the Jews was to be born. Epiphany is about light coming to us. In this passage from

St. Matthew, we have a star leading the way and what is revealed to us comes to us from the light of Christ.

So many years ago now, there was a little boy who was around ten years old who did not understand anything about the signs coming from God. He joined in an in house prayer group that his mother had arranged and was included in the circle prayer and all of a sudden he felt very different and tears came to his eyes. What was going on? After it was over, he returned to life and moved forward. He probably went outside to ride his bike or play with some friends.

A few years later he ended up at a summer church camp with his cousins. Their uncle took them on a school bus across the state to western Pennsylvania to this camp. It was a fascinating week and so much so that the boy returned the next year as well. What stood out for him was the worship times up on the side of a hill that overlooked the camp below. It also gave the view of the clear sky shining right in front of the campers. What did all of that mean? What was the sign God was sending to the boy and maybe the other campers?

Much later in life the boy experienced another sign and was encouraged to seek out the meaning of this new sign. What was tugging at his heart and mind? You see that little boy ignored the signs along the way in one sense but in another sense it was finally seen. What was seen was a new road to travel. It was a

different way of life but it was a way that God was calling him to. The shining star was finally recognized.

I want us all to think about the bright stars that are shining before each one of us individually and corporately. Pay attention to the different roads that come before you. Remember that this child laid in a manger came both with and without our asking. Yet, being encountered by this one sent from God's own heart changes the one so called. Both as we are compelled to move towards the One so humbly born and as we move back into our lives, measuring our next steps in relationship to the powers of this world which at times are very difficult to follow, may we all recognize the true king and our calling from him.

How do we truly hear the story of these travelers to Bethlehem? What is going on around us that can influence our journeys? There is one more piece of the puzzle for me today and that is this is technically the Sunday that we recognize the Baptism of our Lord. When Jesus in Luke's version of the baptismal story tells us, "as Jesus was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

Epiphany is the end of the Christmas season and after our 10:30 service we will take down the manger scene to be put away and set up again next Christmas.

May we always keep our eyes on the signs that God sends us no matter when that may be. The wise men were led by a shining star and may we be led by that same star. May we always find the Son of God in all the places of our lives and may we always remember that at Jesus' baptism God calls him the Beloved. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, open our eyes, our minds and our hearts to your light that leads us on our journeys in life. As the wise men followed a star, help us to follow your light even if it is by a different road. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.