

You Have Seen God

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Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

January 8, 2017—Epiphany Sunday

- Isaiah 60:1-6
- Matthew 2:1-12
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: In the person of Jesus, God's nature is revealed to humankind.

The Gregorian calendar doesn't always make for neat, tidy religious celebrations. Two weeks ago the calendar managed to place Christmas Day on a Sunday. Imagine that: the birth of our Lord celebrated on the Lord's Day! Last week, New Year's Day also landed on Sunday. Having those two holidays occurring on Sundays meant that another holiday landed in a "no man's land" between Sundays. Epiphany, which is always on January 6, was this past Friday.

Epiphany? Is that even a "thing"? And if it is "legit," what does it have to with Christmas, if anything?

If you've ever been trapped in an elevator in December you've heard the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas." From the repetitious song you've presumed that the celebration of Christmas lasts not just one day but twelve (in theory, anyway, if not in practice). Twelve days of Christmas... hence the leaping lords and milking maids and that tree-roosting partridge which apparently has a hankering for fresh pears.

Epiphany is the name most Christians use for that "twelfth day of Christmas." But "Twelfth Day" is not what Epiphany means. The word comes from the Greek language and literally means something like "to shine upon." Nowadays we'd say "epiphany" means an "appearance" or "manifestation"—something becomes evident, visible, known to others.

Tradition associates the Magi (the "Wise Men" or "Kings") with Epiphany. The Magi are part of Matthew's gospel account of the birth of Jesus. (The other gospel birth narrative in Luke has no mention of the Wise Men, whereas Luke describes shepherds abiding in the fields but Matthew makes no mention of them.)

I wonder how many of us grew up reading and hearing those two stories about shepherds and Wise Men and figured they probably played out concurrently. In other words, we imagined that while the heavenly company of angels was talking to the shepherds in fields outside Bethlehem, at that same time the Wise Men noticed a peculiar magic star that seemed to beckon them to follow it toward Judea. The Wise Men mistakenly assumed that anything big in Judea would happen in Jerusalem. That's why the kings went there first instead of directly to the village of Bethlehem about five miles to the south.

Picturing these two storylines playing out concurrently would explain why our manger scenes tend to depict humble shepherds kneeling in the stable on one side, and the Wise Men with adoring expressions are lined up facing the manger on the other side.

But hold on a minute. If you read Matthew and Luke carefully you'll realize that about the only things the two stories have in common are Jesus, Mary and Joseph. We assume Luke's story ends in a stable because Jesus is laid in a manger—a feeding trough. But in Matthew's story, the Magi went not to a stable but into a house where they saw the child and his mother. You can check for yourself: Matthew 2:11. Matthew doesn't say "infant"; he says "child," so apparently quite some time has passed. Joseph isn't mentioned because apparently mother and child are now strong and safe and he's been able to return to work.

Now for a few observations about the observers of the Star of Bethlehem, the Wise Men or Magi. That word sounds like "magicians," doesn't it? It's unclear precisely who these guys were, or

even how many of them there were. Because they presented gold, frankincense and myrrh, tradition has assumed that “three gifts equal three wise men,” but their number is never mentioned. Also, let’s say these magicians (or astrologers or scientists or philosophers or royalty or whatever they were!) had traveled not merely on a midnight run but for weeks and months from far-off Mesopotamia, making their way across the badlands and desert, the Palestinian prairies and Judean outback. Scholars know that such wealthy, esteemed figures never would have set out alone, like the Three Amigos. They would have traveled with large entourages to support them, to protect them.

It’s all this that we remember and celebrate on this oddly-named holiday called Epiphany. But what does it mean? What difference does it make that we commemorate Epiphany?

Here’s what Epiphany means to you: you have seen God.

On Christmas Eve I reminded us of a very familiar verse of scripture. Here’s a modern translation of that verse, but I bet you’ll still recognize it: “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”¹

“God gave his one and only Son....” That’s the heart of Christmas. The infinite and incomparable God of Heaven and Earth chose to engage God’s creation, God creatures directly, personally, “in the flesh.” God did that by being born into this world, born to live in the midst of humanity, born to befriend us and to lead us, to forgive us and to love us.

God was born into an imperfect world. We make it imperfect. Our mistakes haunt us. It’s hard to forget them. The other day I came to realize that my memory had messed up the purpose of a community meeting I was scheduled to lead. Someone else was able to fix the consequence of my confusion fairly easily and no one was terribly inconvenienced... but still, my little mistake bugged me – haunted me – for the rest of the day.

Big mistakes haunt us, too: a detail overlooked that ended up costing the company a big deal; a casual comment that caused great offense; a moment of carelessness that led to an accident; behaviors of neglect or self-centeredness that led to the break-up of a relationship.

It’s hard to shake the memory of a mistake, a shortcoming, an error, a sin. Feelings of guilt caused by the memory can change the tone of the rest of the day... or the rest of your life.

Now... did you ever imagine that feelings of guilt and shame are gifts? Guilt and shame are gifts God gives so we’ll notice when we’ve fallen short, where we’ve gone wrong... so we won’t choose to go that way again. And God offers an even more powerful gift – the gift of forgiveness – because God doesn’t want shame or guilt to be a way of life.

God sent the only Son “so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”

That’s why Jesus was born into the world: to rescue us, to spare us, to save us from the penalty we deserve because of our failures and shortcomings... to save us from being forever haunted by our sinfulness. Not only that, but God entered our world in Jesus to offer “whole and lasting life...” and not just to the Jewish community into which Jesus was born. That gift of forgiveness and new life is intended for everyone.

And that’s where the Wise Men enter the picture. They weren’t part of that Jewish community. They were foreigners from a far-off land. And yet it was part of God’s plan that the Savior would be made known to Jew and gentile, to Israelite and foreigner, to poor and rich, girl and boy, proud and humble, deserving and undeserving.... God’s Son was sent for the sake of all because humanity’s distinctions don’t matter. What matters is that we know God, and trust God, and accept and serve God by following Jesus.

The Twelfth Day of Christmas affirms the true worth of the gift we received at Christmas: the gift of Jesus. In Jesus we see that we can live godly lives in our real-world, nitty-gritty, day-after-day existence. For in Jesus we have seen God.

[sermons: se20170108; © 2017 Jon M. Fancher]

¹ John 3:16 The Message translation