

## EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD | JANUARY 3, 2021

ISAIAH 60:1-6 | PSALM 72:1-7, 10-14 | EPHESIANS 3:1-12 | MATTHEW 2:1-12

I thought I would talk a little bit this morning about the worst sermon I ever preached. This was about five years or six years ago when I was on internship in the city. And the church I was serving had this daily mass at noon, and I was slotted to do it one day. This is a small mass, short homily, maybe half a dozen people there.

And there was some article that had come out fairly recently in the *Times* or something about homelessness in the city. And I think Mike Bloomberg had made some tone-deaf comments on people who live in shelters. And so part of the sermon was about how we talk about housing or something. I'm a little blurry on the exact details, but that was sort of the general idea.

But what I do remember was stepping out of the sacristy all robed up with this tightly written sermon in hand and realizing that half the people there were people experiencing homelessness. And I thought to myself, *Man, you really messed this up*. Because at no point when I was writing this homily *about* people experiencing homelessness did I realize that I was going to be preaching *to* people experiencing homelessness. It was awkward. It was embarrassing. I was trying to change what I'd written on the fly, which never really works. It was bad. But it was also a sort of necessary but uncomfortable epiphany.

In the Christian tradition, the Epiphany tells the story of God's revelation of the Christ child to the Gentiles. In St. Matthew's telling, these wise men travel from the east to visit this new king. They show up with their gifts and pay him homage. It's great fodder for Creche scenes and holiday cards and, since you can have an infinite number of magi<sup>1</sup>, middle school Christmas pageants.

Epiphanies are great. But part of the reason we think they're great is because we tell this story from the perspective of the wise men. These wise men get brought into God's story somewhat unexpectedly. It's all good for them.

But what about the Epiphany from Mary and Joseph's perspective? It's a little more complicated. They know they are a part of God's story. They've been getting visits from angels and words from on high. They are part of this covenant community in relationship with God. If you tell the story of salvation history, it runs right through their family. This manger, this family, this night is at the very center of God's story.

Until the wise men show up. And after you get past the surprise of uninvited guests, you realize that God has been talking to other people too. People you don't know. People you didn't invite. People you have never seen before. People you don't really understand. And maybe you thought that you were at the center of God's story, but then you realize that the center is actually over here somewhere.

That's what an epiphany is. It's the moment you discover that there's more to the world, more to other people, and more to God than you realized. That God's action is not contained by our own experience of the world.

Sometimes we say that the Epiphany is the story of Christ being revealed to the Gentiles. And this works, but it makes it sound like it's self-evident that Mary and Joseph should be there, and it's the magi who need a reason to be in the scene. You could imagine a way of telling this story in which the wise men show up and Mary says, "Well, if you guys want to hang around for a bit that's fine with me." But that's really not what the Epiphany is. For the magi, it's an experience of inclusion and promise. But for Mary and Joseph, it's an experience of being decentered. Of realizing that their presence in this story is no more obvious or legitimate or inevitable than the magi's.

Part of the reason we have epiphanies is because we assume that our experience of the world is normal. Some of you probably remember last winter we had Kimberly Vaughn here from the synod office to do her hospitality training. How do you welcome newcomers into your community of faith? What can

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<sup>1</sup> We often assume there were three magi since they present three gifts, but Matthew doesn't give us a number.

you do to make people feel comfortable? And one of the things she talked about was her experience as a Black woman traveling around visiting majority-White churches in the synod. And one of the questions she gets over and over is, “When did you become Lutheran?” The answer, of course, is that she grew up in a Lutheran family and has always been Lutheran. Why do you ask?<sup>2</sup>

Well, people ask because they have an idea of what a “normal” Lutheran is. And that’s often determined by race, by class, by sexuality, by culture, by education, by lots of things. In the case of Lutherans, that tends to mean white, middle class, heterosexual, Northern European, college educated, etc. That’s just “normal.” And if a person doesn’t fit into those boxes, there must be some sort of explanation or justification. And for people who have never had to justify their presence in a community, it’s easy to think some things are theologically normative just because they’re statistically common.

It’s tempting to just project our own experience out onto the world and normalize our own characteristics. It’s harder to focus on the community God is forming us into. To use St. Paul’s language, it can be challenging to see others as “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” The important phrase there is “fellow heirs.” Because it means that whether you’re a Mary or a Joseph or a wise man or a shepherd, you have just as much of a place at the manger as anyone else. And your place is never contingent on anyone else’s approval.

Epiphanies are difficult. They’re awkward. They’re uncomfortable. Being decentered isn’t exactly easy. Epiphanies mean realizing that there’s more to the story than we’re aware of. Sometimes when we have an epiphany, it makes us think back about what we thought before. How was I so ignorant that it didn’t occur to me that I’d be preaching to people experiencing homelessness? If you realize the question you asked the assistant to the bishop was based on a wildly off-base assumption, what else have you assumed about people? The self-reflection that comes from epiphanies isn’t easy.

So often, the people who need to be saved aren’t the magi. They’re the Mary and Josephs who think they’ve earned their place at the manger, who forget that they are guests like everyone else. And that’s why epiphanies are a kind of gift, too. Epiphanies tell us that God is not content to let us wallow in our false assumptions or roll through the world in our glass ball of ignorance but makes us “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Who manifest the “wisdom of God in its rich variety” through our life, work, and witness. No, the center of the story, the thing that holds us together, of course, is Christ. Not our own achievements or our own narratives or our own presence, but the one in whom God created all things.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>2</sup> Inevitable sidebar here is that no one ever asks me this even though I didn’t grow up in the Lutheran church.