

## EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD | JANUARY 2, 2021

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

There's an old story—I think I've shared this before—about a professor at Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. And on the first day of class, he would bring in this massive copy of the Torah, some edition that weighed twenty pounds or something. And he would drop it on the middle of the table.

And the whole class would be shocked into silence. And after thirty seconds or so, he would ask, “So. What does it say?” And everyone would sit there in silence. And after a long pause, he would say, “Exactly. It doesn't say anything. You have to read it.”

For you to get meaning from these texts, you have to make a bunch of decisions about what language means, how images are used, and what theological claims are being made. We aren't passive recipients of meaning contained within the text. We're actively engaged with the construction of meaning. It doesn't say anything. You have to read it.

Whenever we read scripture, it helps to ask some very simple questions. The same type of questions we ask when we first learn to read literature. Questions like *Who is the audience for this story? Is it written in the first, second, or third person?* And—the one I want to focus on today—*What do the characters in the story know? And how is it different from what the narrator knows?*

In Matthew's Christmas story, the gap in knowledge is pretty big. Unlike Luke, who focuses mostly on Mary, Matthew focuses mostly on Joseph. Joseph is set to marry Mary when he finds out she's pregnant. So he thinks about leaving her quietly, but he decides to stay after he's told in a dream that “the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” and will “save his people from their sins.” So what does Joseph know? Well, this child has something to do with God, and he will be an important religious figure for the Jewish people of their community. And that's pretty much it.

And in Joseph's mind, he thinks about this child mostly in terms of the way it will affect him. *How are other people going to view me? How is this child going to change my life? How is this going to change my relationship with Mary?* When Jesus is about to enter the world, Joseph is thinking about him primarily in relationship to himself.

Is that the same perspective, the same knowledge that the narrator has? Not even close. The narrator in the story knows way, way more. The narrator of the story knows that there are wise men from the east who have been checking out this star in the sky and are set to track down whatever it means. These are not Jews. These are not people who read Isaiah cover to cover and are expecting a messiah. These are people who are just sort of interested in this radically new act.

So read today's story with that knowledge gap in mind. We often imagine this story from the wise men's perspective. *We thought there might be a child here. There is. This is great. We brought gifts.*

But how does this play out from Joseph's perspective? Well, it's very different. You have to wonder what Joseph thought when the wise men showed up. Probably that there'd been some kind of mistake. *No, you're surely looking for someone else. You must have the wrong stable or something.* Only to discover that there is no mistake.

You had a story in your mind about this child. And the characters are the baby, Mary, you, and God. That's it. But what happens when these wise men show up? Well, you realize that story isn't quite big enough. It's not just you and God. It's the baby and Mary and you and God and apparently a whole bunch of other people you've never met before. And those other people are just as integral to God's story as you are.

That's what the Epiphany of Our Lord is all about. God's story is bigger than our perspective. That the default setting we have in our heads where we are the center of everything and things are real when they affect us isn't the perspective God has.

That isn't just true for Joseph but for all of us, too. Whenever we encounter another person, we are always encountering someone who is already in relationship with God. When the wise men show up unannounced, they might be new to me. But they're not new to God. And so before I start trying to define these people in relationship to me, why are these people barging in on my story?, I need to grapple with the fact that these are individuals whose source of life is the Word that's been made flesh.

Some of the earliest Christian writers called this as a "non-passionate" view of others.<sup>1</sup> And what they meant by that wasn't that you don't care about anything. What they meant was that you didn't view other people primarily in terms of your own desires and experience. For many of us, including me, other people are defined primarily by their effect on us. When I think of the people I deal with every day, I think of them as helpful, annoying, wise, insufferable, etc. primarily based on how they impact my life. I know who this person is because of how they affect me. A non-passionate perspective just means recognizing that other people are already in relationship with God before I step into the picture. And people may be many things to me, but they're always people who are made in the image of God and sustained by God's Word.<sup>2</sup>

Epiphanies happen when we get that non-passionate perspective. When our reaction to the wise men isn't Why are these random people showing up? but This story is bigger than I thought it was. It's bigger than just me.

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 17.

<sup>2</sup> This image comes from the prologue of John's gospel.

Wherever Jesus goes, there are epiphanies. There are people who discover that the design of God's great love is bigger than our experience, projections, and desires. That the center of the story isn't my own ego but the Word made flesh and born among us.

Let me give you one more way to think about this. Some of you may remember that about a year ago, we sort of went back and forth on whether we'd be celebrating communion during remote services. And so I invited people to just shoot me an email or give me a call and tell me what communion means to them and why we should or shouldn't celebrate it during remote services. And the answers were really interesting. Most of them had something to do with forgiveness or comfort or because it's our common practice. Those are all fine answers.

But Epiphany gives us another answer. That we gather at table not just to be forgiven or comforted or out of habit, but to see one another correctly. The Eucharist gives us the right kind of perspective on each other. When we gather at table, we see one another not in terms of our own desires and experiences and resentments but from God's perspective.

What lies between us is today and everyday we gather at table is the same gift what lay between Joseph and the wise men that first epiphany: the body of Christ, the passion of God and the gift to all creation.

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