

Introduction to the Scripture:

Epiphany - the Feast we celebrate today and the season which begins on Wednesday - is all about discovering Jesus. The word "epiphany" comes from two Greek words – *epi*: which means on, and *phanein*: which means to *show* or to *shine*. This is a season of light, and manifestation: God revealing himself to the world in Jesus. And the season begins with the same reading every year, which you also heard on Christmas Eve - the Magi following the star to Jesus. Listen for what the Wisemen discover and how they respond.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'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 my people Israel.'*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon: *Reacting or Responding?*

Now that our calendars say "January," our planet has come full circle, and things should feel new. Yet for many of us, the calendar is full of many of the same things as before – work, school, book groups, committee meetings – and missing the same things as before – get togethers with friends and family, the prospect of taking a trip. All this amid the weight of the winter weather.

The church also turns a page this week, into a new season: Epiphany.

Epiphany is a season of signs – beginning with the story of the wisemen today with their Star in the East, and it ends on Feb. 14, with the Transfiguration of Jesus and a fire on a mountain. It is a season of bright, God-sightings at a cold, dark time of the year for us.

It's as if the church is showing us that our world only appears dark, and cold; but is in fact vivid and alive. As Barbara Brown Taylor says so eloquently,

Epiphany reminds us that we live in a world that is leaking light, and that this long stretch of predictability we call our daily life is really a wondrous game of hide-and-seek with the divine.

Epiphany, the season of light coming into the world, is about sight. It is about looking at the same thing and seeing something different. It is about locating glory in the unexpected. Bethlehem. A poor young mother. Edges of town. A cross.

So, let's look at the many "epiphanies" that the people of this season have had. And let's notice how they REACT, and how they RESPOND to both events in the world that are beyond their control, and events that are clearly God speaking and moving in their lives. And notice also how much these things are intertwined.

First there's Mary's pregnancy – the work of the Holy Spirit.

Her **reaction**: How can this be I don't have a husband?

Her **response** "Let it be to me according to your word."

Second there's Joseph – events are REALLY beyond his control – his fiancé is pregnant and not by him. His **reaction**: I'll divorce her quietly. Then the angel speaks to him in a dream assuring him that Mary is not lying to him. His **response**: to stay with Mary and be a father to Jesus.

Next the Shepherds – their **reaction** to the angel was fear (terror in fact). But when the reinforcement angels were brought in and they heard what was going on in Bethlehem, their **response** was to go and see and to then spread the good news.

And then there are the wisemen and Herod – the main players for today. It seems the wisemen are reacting and responding all over the place....They read the signs and followed a star – for probably hundreds of miles and many months, carrying the weight of their gifts. Then there's the unexpected summons to appear before King Herod - who is actually the one who tells them that they'll find Jesus in Bethlehem.

And like Joseph before them, it is in a dream that they are redirected and shown the right thing to do. And they respond – by returning to their country by another road. Again, events beyond their control shaping the direction of their journey.

And Herod – how does he react and respond? He certainly does not greet the news of a newborn king with joy, nor does he search for the right gift to give the messiah. Rather, he is afraid. And not just Herod, but "all Jerusalem with him" (v.3).

Why afraid? Perhaps because the one thing the corrupt and powerful seek more than anything else is to remain in control. Gone from Herod and his court is any notion of the kind of servant leadership prescribed by Israel's prophets. Gone is the memory that God placed them in their positions to serve rather than be served. Herod is only out for #1, and so is immediately threatened by even the mere mention of another – and therefore rival – king.

And so if fear is Herod's reaction, his response, along with the chief priests and scribes, is to conspire to find the Messiah and kill him.

And what about us? What does fear do to us? Do we install more security systems in our homes and cars? Do we build more gates or buy more guns? Do we save even more for retirement, pulling back from charitable giving to make sure we have enough? Do we close our hearts – and minds – to those who are different from us?

We live in a world riddled by fear, where COVID doesn't seem to be retreating, a world of devastating super-storms and school shootings, a world where innocents die every day from preventable illness and hunger.

So also, in the story of the visit of the magi – and the subsequent slaughter of the innocents in the verses to come – we get an accurate if also difficult picture of the world.

And that is what is at the heart of this story: the promise that it is precisely this world that God came to, this people so ruled by fear and the need to be in control, that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves.

As Denise Levertov writes in her poem “On the Mystery of the Incarnation”:

*It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart.*

So often, we find ourselves in situations beyond our control – sometimes of our own making, sometimes not. How do we react? More importantly, how do we respond? Are we open to hearing what God has to say? Are we open to being redirected?

Because while we can't control things that happen to us and around us, we also can't control how God will reveal himself to us. It could be here in worship – during the singing of a hymn, the reading of the lessons, the music of the singers, the quiet of prayer, the sharing of Communion.

Or it could be in other ways / or places, which when brought here gain a deeper meaning and propel us on our journey toward Christ, which is all about glorifying God and serving others. Which also usually ends up redirecting us.

Perhaps a little like this:

Twenty girls, between the ages of three to twelve, pile into the entrance of the Korean Cultural Center, where they have come to practice traditional Korean dance. According to Korean custom, everyone takes off their shoes when they enter a building, and the girls observe this ritual—in their own fashion. They topple over one another as they toss their shoes into a large pile and head off to rehearsal.

While the dance teacher leads the class, one of the moms methodically picks up each of the dozens of shoes in the large pile and sorts them into pairs. She matches up the shoes and sets each pair neatly down, with the toes pointed toward the door. By the end of her ritual she has turned all the shoes around. When the girls finish dancing, their shoes are ready for them to head out the door and on to the next event in their lives.

And we get to experience something similar. We tumble into the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany season – shopping and wrapping, cooking and cleaning, with hopes and desires and expectations for ourselves and our loved ones. And especially this year, I wonder if we might have been reacting more than responding to the events around us.

At its worst we feel “out of control.” Which is also perhaps how much of this past year has felt.

Which really is an apt and fine description of the Christian life. Because when we go deep into the Christian story and the faith, we realize that we really are not in control, and that is a GOOD THING. Well, it’s a good thing for those who believe that God is constantly revealing Himself even now, and giving us signs all along the way. Then we can be glad we’re not in control!

Because while we were stumbling our way through December’s dance class, or 2020’s dance class, someone has been straightening our shoes for us. And when we tumble back out, we’ll find that they’ve been pointed in a new direction – outward facing.

And we leave the chaos behind, at least for a while, ‘til it returns next year or next summer or next month or next week and we return to have our shoes straightened out again.

Because this really is the pattern for our lives as Christians. Our planet has come full circle; but for us, this does not mean just another round in an endless, futile turning of things.

So may we be like the magi, who don’t just follow a star - because that will never be enough. May we be like the magi who hear what God has to say to them and respond: heading home by a different road.

And remember that you don’t need to spend months and make a physical journey to discover Jesus. In fact, you’ll be encountering him in a few minutes when we share communion together. And after that, I wonder what your “new road” will be...

Amen.