**“THE LIGHT OF EPIPHANY”**

Matthew 2:1-12

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We associate Epiphany with light. The star seems connected to John’s words about light shining in the darkness – never mind how utterly different Matthew’s and John’s gospels are in the way they talk about Jesus coming into the world. When we read Matthew’s story about the magi coming from afar, we understand this as the start of the revelation of God’s promised savior to the world beyond Jesus’ family, beyond Bethlehem, beyond the bounds of one culture and faith community. Epiphany means “revealing.”

But it seems to me that Matthew’s story conceals as much as it reveals. It makes us want to know more. That’s true of other Biblical texts, but I can’t think of one that leaves me with as many questions as this story does. What did Mary and Joseph think about these unexpected visitors? What did they do with the gifts? And so many questions about the magi! Who were they, really? Where did they come from? What did they believe in? Why were they interested in Jesus? How exactly did they get so much information from a star? If they were really wise, why couldn’t they figure out that Herod was a cruel and power-hungry tyrant (which wasn’t exactly a secret)? What happened to them after they went home? What did they do with the rest of their lives? We want to think they must have been changed somehow, but there’s nothing to tell us.

And the larger questions, the “meta” questions: Why is this story in Matthew’s gospel in the first place? Is it mainly to support Matthew’s thesis that Jesus is the long-awaited descendent of Israel’s great King David, sent by God to bring kingdom of heaven into the world? (Hence the homage, the “royal” gifts, and the allusions to Hebrew scriptures about kings coming). How historical is it all? The story has so many highly symbolic elements – journey, star, strangers, gifts, danger and divine intervention; is that how we’re supposed to read it? If it’s based on an actual happening, where did Matthew get his information?

So many questions!

Perhaps it’s the gaps in the story that beg to be filled. There must be a reason why over the centuries so many traditions and stories and conjectures built up around these dozen verses of Matthew’s gospel: the magi were astronomers, or astrologers (in ancient times, more or less the same); they might have been from Persia, where they could have been priests or prophets in the ancient Zoroastrian religion… or possibly they were Nabateans from what’s now Jordan. “Magi” can also mean “magicians,” and sometimes has a negative connotation, as in “charlatan” … which makes their presence in Matthew’s story more puzzling.

Three gifts suggested there were three of them (tho’ Matthew doesn’t say), and eventually they acquired names – Gaspar, Balthazar, and Melchior are the names we might be familiar with, but they were given other names by eastern Orthodox and other Christian communities. They were said to be kings – wealthy, powerful. Symbolic meanings were attributed to each of their gifts.

The magi became the subject of much art, and sometimes were depicted as young, middle-aged, and elderly – representing all the ages of man. (It wasn’t until very recently that anybody thought to imagine them as female!) In most of the art – and nativity sets – we’re familiar with, they are portrayed as from different ethnic backgrounds – supposedly to represent the diversity of the world’s peoples coming to worship the Christ child.

Legends say that the magi became Christian converts; some say they were eventually martyred for their faith. There were tribes in central Asia that converted to Christianity in the 11th century and claimed the magi as their ancestors. The poet T.S. Eliot imagines the magi as dissatisfied with their old lives, once they’ve returned to their homes – nothing will ever compare to that one encounter with the Christ.

There are many who would say that it’s important to strip away all these accretions – all the legends, traditions, symbols, suppositions, imaginings – and look only at what Matthew actually says. Because that’s the scripture, the gospel, and the only place to find the truth at the heart of the story. I might once have said that. But I’m not sure I would, now.

For example, the now-common representation of the magi as from different places and ethnic backgrounds isn’t quite consistent with Matthew, who clearly sees them as having come from and returning to the same county. But I’m not sure I’d call it *wrong*. It seems, somehow, much in the spirit of Matthew’s larger message about the kingdom of God, and going into all the world. Does Matthew say anything to suggest that the magi were kings? No. But is the idea of men with wealth and worldly power paying homage to the greater power of divinity-in-the-vulnerability-of-a-child a compelling picture? Yes, indeed. I don’t think we can know why some ancient Christians in central Asia looked at the magi as their spiritual and perhaps literal ancestors… but perhaps it helped them better define their own connections to the story of Jesus.

It’s possible, I believe, that the gaps, the spaces in the story that prompt our questions, also invite imaginative exploration and different insights. The spaces of our unanswered questions may allow room for the Spirit to move and to speak, in a way that a detailed explanation of the meaning of a text doesn’t.

The point I’m making here is not really about the magi, or even about this story, as much as about scripture in general. How we approach it. How we think about it. What we do with it.

Of course there is no substitute for scholarship. It’s important for our understanding that we distinguish Matthew’s “Christmas story” from the very different versions in Luke’s and John’s gospels. Of course we need to take care that we aren’t reading things into Biblical texts that aren’t there, that we don’t ignore the writers’ intentions. We need to try and understand words and their meanings, and a text’s purposes and historical context. Careful scholarly study can be a deeply spiritual and faith-nurturing practice as well as a learning experience.

But analyzing every word and lining up all the historical research and providing a complete and exhaustive exposition of the meaning of a text can also render that text kind of … lifeless. Words on a page don’t make scripture. Mere historicity doesn’t make scripture. Knowledge doesn’t make scripture. Even the presence of God’s Spirit in the life of the long-ago writer doesn’t make a text scripture *for us*.

To encounter a text as *scripture* – sacred, living, transformative Word – involves something that happens in the spaces….

the space between us and the text

the spaces within the text

the space of unanswered questions

the space between my understanding and another’s

the space between us and God.

That *something* might not be answers to all the questions we have. It might not always involve a clearly defined fact or truth or instruction, as we have come to expect.

Matthew’s story of the magi is a text that really helps me to realize this… because my questions about it are so many… and they are mostly without answers. This story invites us into the journey, into the discovery, into awe and wonder, into awareness of mysteries we can’t explain … and yes, also into the chilling awareness that Jesus was born, vulnerable, into a world of danger and fear.

This story invites us to wander around in the spaces, in the questions. It engages our imagination in dozens of possible directions as we wonder about what happened, and how, and why, and what it means. This story is a deep vein of rich imagery and spiritual wisdom. It has the capacity to show us something new time after time, year after year. It’s not one Epiphany, but many.

Diana Butler Bass says that epiphanies surprise and disrupt. They shake up our accustomed ways of thinking and being and doing, and force us to see things in a new light. But we have to pay attention, she says, because “revelations can be missed if one isn’t attentive or attuned to sacred surprises.”

Epiphany asks us to be attentive to the Spirit’s sacred surprises. The star is an invitation:

To be curious

To be ready

To accept the journey with its risks and uncertainty

To recognize the presence of the holy, and bow down

To acknowledge mystery, and to trust

To discover new directions

To imagine what might be

The light of Epiphany doesn’t eliminate darkness, and it doesn’t reveal everything.

It just helps us to see the way, a little. Enough.

In his Christmas poem “For the Time Being,” W.H. Auden imagines what the magi might say to us about their journey. I love these words, and will leave you with them:

“To discover how to be truthful now…

 To discover how to be living now…

 To discover how to be loving now…

 To discover how to be human now…

 …is the reason we follow this star.”

RESOURCES:

Liddy Barlow, “The Magi’s Interfaith Encounter” and “In the Lectionary,” in *The Christian Century*, December 30, 2022

Diana Butler Bass “Active Epiphany” on <https://dianabutlerbass.com/the-cottage/>

Eric VanDen Eykel, “Who Were the Three Wise Men Who Visited Jesus,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, January 2, 2023