

By Another Way
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
The Epiphany of the Lord
January 6, 2013

Epiphany is one of my favorite Sundays of the church year. The world out there may be done with Christmas, but we're not! Drug stores and grocery stores may have cleared out their Christmas inventory and moved on to Valentine's Day. Not us. The hype, the stress, the shopping, spending, wrapping, traveling, cooking, cleaning, and quarreling of the holidays is over, but we still have one more Sunday reserved for celebrating the miracle, without all the baggage.

My family has a favorite Christmas ornament, which I brought with me this morning to show you. It's a homemade plaster ornament of the baby Jesus and every year we hang it in exactly the same place on our Christmas tree, front, center, eye level. The ornament has a name. We call it Smiling Mighty Jesus.

It got its name the year Carlos was doing his medical internship. He was treating a patient for spinal meningitis, but she couldn't pronounce "spinal meningitis." Instead she would say, "Doc, I've got Smiling Mighty Jesus," and she would say it as if it was a good thing. And, according to Carlos, although she suffered and was seriously ill, she never seemed overly worried. Evidently when you've got Smiling Mighty Jesus, you can deal with things.

When Carlos and I unpacked our Christmas boxes that very year, we came upon this homemade plaster ornament. "Look!" I said with a sense of immediate and astonished recognition. "It's Smiling Mighty Jesus!" said Carlos. We were young and in love and we hugged each other and hung the ornament and felt like from now on we could handle anything because we had Smiling Mighty Jesus, too!

An epiphany is a moment of revelation or discovery. The word means "manifestation" or "showing." The Day of Epiphany is a day of astonishment, of sudden and thorough recognition. The wise men, visitors from the non-Jewish outside world, discover Smiling Mighty Jesus for themselves. The glory of God is made manifest in the baby of Bethlehem. The grace of God given to world in and through this tiny child shows itself, shines through, *smiles*.

And there's more. Epiphany celebrates the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Yes, I know, he's still a baby, so we can't exactly speak of his ministry, yet. But we can see in the story from Matthew 2 how he is already going public. On the day we call Epiphany, Jesus shows himself to *outsiders* and the good news begins to spread.

Another reason Epiphany is one of my favorite Sundays is because it features *outsiders*. The wise men in Matthew 2 have absolutely no connection to anything that has happened previously in the Bible stories, nor do they reappear later on in the Gospels. They have no relation to God's chosen people Israel, they are descended from nobody special in our Old Testament, and what they go on to do after these 12 short verses in Matthew is anyone's guess.

They seem familiar to us, thanks to Christmas pageants, carols and centuries of Christian art. They appear every year in our mind's eye like old Bible friends bearing their expected gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But the facts are: these guys show up in the biblical narrative as pagan strangers. They are geographical outsiders—from the East—and more significantly they are religious outsiders.

It's easy to forget that ancient neareastern culture was fiercely territorial, with distinct boundaries drawn and maintained around ethnic and religious groups. Good Jews were to retain their good Jewishness by staying separate from non-Jews and their false gods. There were restrictions on intermarriage and grave warnings not to taint Judaism with anything pagan.

In this context, the long awaited Jewish Messiah is born and what happens? Nobody in Jewish circles comes to visit him, worship him, or offer gifts. No scribes, no Pharisees, no teachers of the law, no insiders. Instead, the Bible records a visit from pagan strangers. Wise men from the east. Outsiders. Heathens.

With this oddball story, we see from the beginning how God turns every expectation about the Messiah upside down and inside out. We see the first illustration of what Jesus will go on to teach in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, when he says the last shall be first. We see how in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. We see how in Christ there is no dividing line between those who belong and those who don't.

And we see what impact Christ has on these pagan strangers. It is huge!

Whenever I really want to get into a Bible story, I look at the verbs. I actually take out a pencil, the college English major in me comes out, and I circle the verbs. When I did that for this story, here is what I noticed. The wise men *observe*... a star. They *see*... that the star has stopped. They *see*... the child with his mother Mary. These are the verbs of spectators.

But the wise men do not remain spectators! They *enter*... the house. They *kneel*... They *pay homage* to the child... They *open*... their treasure chests. They *offer*... their gifts.

Here in the verbs is a template for the Christian life, the life of faith. Those who observe and see can't help but enter, kneel, pay homage, open, and give. Spectators to God's revelation become participants.

When we see Smiling Mighty Jesus we worship and serve him. Recognition—epiphany—brings us to our knees.

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For a manger we have a table. For the babe in swaddling clothes we have bread and grape juice, symbols of his flesh and blood that, through the mystery of holy communion, become for us what theologians call the “real presence” of Christ. We might say that whatever star we have been following on our faith journey has come to rest here, over this table.

Here we see for ourselves: Smiling Mighty Jesus. Here is our Epiphany. Here is Emmanuel, God-with-us, God-for-us, God-with-and-for-all-of-us-including-and-especially-the-outsiders. It brings us to our knees.

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The Bible itself seems scarcely able to express the joy and wonder of the wise men's Epiphany. Even the Bible's own words fail, and here is what I mean.

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Matthew 2:10 reads, “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.” Now, remember, I was an English major in college, and that word “overwhelmed” catches my English major's eye.

“Overwhelmed” is a very strong word, and these men in this story are very wise men. They were not overwhelmed by King Herod, who tried to trick and manipulate them. They were not overwhelmed by their perilous journey from Persia to Palestine across the desert. Clearly these gentlemen are not easily overwhelmed.

I looked up “overwhelmed” in my concordance to see how the word is used elsewhere in the Bible. In every other instance, the word is used to describe something bad: overwhelmed by a flood, overwhelmed by enemies, overwhelmed with fear. There is only one instance in the Bible where what is overwhelming is something good, and this is it.

Hmm, I said to myself, I wonder what it says in the Greek. I looked up the Greek, and things got even more interesting. If you were to translate the Greek word-by-word, it would say something like this: they were joyfully full of very great joy, or, they were exceeding joyfully joyful.

Our Bible uses the word “overwhelmed” to capture the overall sense of the phrase, but the actual words seem to trip over themselves: *joyfully joyful, exceedingly great*. It is as if the Gospel writer can’t find a joyful enough word to describe the joy of the Magi, so he has to use the same word twice, and then add on extra qualifiers like “very great” and “exceedingly”.

A slightly more familiar translation reads, “When they saw that the star had stopped, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy” (King James Version). It doesn’t just say that the Magi *rejoiced*. That would have been a good clear statement that they were happy. It doesn’t just say that they *rejoiced with joy*. And it doesn’t just say that they *rejoiced with great joy*. It says “*they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy*.”

And we can learn from this that the moment of their arrival—their epiphany—was more joyful than there are words to describe. Their joy exceeded the boundaries of language. The joy they felt was above and beyond anything in the standard human repertoire of feelings and experiences.

Their joy is not something that can be recorded with a precise English (or Greek) word. Their joy explodes the sense of the best words that we have. The Bible stutters and runs out of its own words to describe this singular moment in human history—this Epiphany.

When we honor the part of us that yearns for the truth about God, when we act on our yearnings, and go and search diligently until we discover Smiling Mighty Jesus for ourselves, we too will partake of a joy that is greater than any words we might use to describe it.

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Something else I love about Epiphany is how the story ends.

“Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,” Matthew writes, the wise men “left for their own country by another road.” (An awesome James Taylor song speculates about this telling detail: it’s called “Home by Another Way” and will cost you \$1 to download from iTunes.)

After seeing Jesus, the wise men took a different way back home. And it’s a good thing, because we all know what Herod would have done with the information the wise man had about the baby.

God warned them about Herod in a dream. So I will warn you in a sermon: if you have experienced the power of the presence of God in Jesus Christ today or any time in your lifetime, do not let your own personal Herod sabotage your epiphany. The powers and principalities of this world seem ever to move against the wondrous love of God in Christ Jesus, and we can’t let them win.

We know a great joy that is for all people. The Herods without or the Herods within will kill that joy if we are not careful, if we do not choose our words carefully, and our paths.

Here is wondrous love. Here is Smiling Mighty Jesus. The star shines bright o'er the place where he lies. Let us rejoice with exceedingly great joy, and with exceedingly great determination to outsmart Herod and send his minions packing.

To the glory and praise of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling