

## Epiphany Experiences

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January tends to be one of my least favorite months. The Christmas and New Year's festivities are over and now it seems we have only to look ahead to a cold, dark winter. As we box up the Christmas decorations, it seems all the excitement has ended. We redirect our focus to the responsibilities of work and home and return to the normalcy of everyday life. What does all the excitement of the past month mean for us now? Where have we to go from here but back to normal?

Let us pray.

Gracious God, bless my words that through your Spirit they would speak into the hearts of your people, gathered around your Holy Word – the only Word that is the true light in our lives.  
In Christ's name. Amen.

Throughout Advent, we set out to prepare our hearts for the birth of Christ. We watched and listened as all roads led to a Promise, born in a manger in Bethlehem. Each of us even traveled along one of these roads as that Promise worked within us to transform our lives. Perhaps the Good News came upon us like a great declaration from God and we followed Mary's road of fearful trust and obedience. Or maybe the Promise came to us like a soft whisper in the night and we followed Joseph's road of overturned plans and dutiful resignation. Or maybe we were overcome by a thunderous song of the Heavenly Host and we followed the shepherd's road of great joy and expectation. But now that the Promise has arrived and we have gathered to greet Him, where do we go from here?

We find our answer today – Epiphany. The Greek word for “epiphany” means “appearance” or “revelation.” So Epiphany is God's self-revelation in Christ – God in Jesus, making Himself known to the world. Today completes the season of Christmas and marks the beginning of a new season – one of celebration of God's manifestation in Christ Jesus.

As we celebrated Jesus' entrance into the world at Christmas, we now celebrate Jesus being made known to the world. Christ didn't just come to earth all those years ago to hang out for a bit. Rather, Christ came to earth to bring God's presence to us, to make a difference in the lives of God's people. And he continues to make God present and to make a difference in our lives now – even in January.

In today's text, we meet the Magi – or the Wise Men. Here we find yet another road to the Christ child. This road is paved by the light of a star.

It's important to note that the Wise Men were not Jews. We're told that they came from the East, which means that they would have been Gentiles. This is where we discover that the Good News of Christ is for all of creation, not just for Israel. As non-Jews, the Wise Men would not have been living in the expectation of a savior foretold by the prophets. They didn't set out along the road to Jesus because they knew some grand promise of salvation. The Lord did not tell them in a dream that they should go to Bethlehem. No army of angels broke into their common lives to tell them that something new and exciting had happened and they had better go check it out.

No, the Wise Men were simply going about their standard routine. As educated astrologers, they looked to the skies for their information. In doing so, they learned of Jesus' birth from the rising of a star designated for the King of the Jews. For the Wise Men, the road to Christ was one of hints and signs.

Perhaps some of you traveled the Magi's road of hints and signs this past Advent season. Perhaps you saw Christ's light shining in subtle ways as you juggled the holiday festivities and the demands of a new seminary term – tried to balance seemingly endless reading assignments with the equally daunting search for the perfect gift for each of your loved ones. Maybe the revelation of Christ's light came to you in the midst of all this.

Perhaps in the refrain of a Christmas song heard in the crowded mall; or maybe it came as you sat here in chapel, joining your voice with those around you in a prayer of confession and remembering anew that your sins are forgiven because Christ has entered in; or maybe a colleague or classmate offered just the right word of encouragement in the midst of a busy and exhausting day and you were struck to see Christ's light even then.

None of these things are miraculous. You could have continued with your day, thinking nothing of them. But through the Advent liturgies and traditions, we learn to watch and wait for the way of the Lord to come to us. That is the great importance of rituals like worship – they train our eyes to see the glory of God when it's revealed – even in the mundane.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, the Wise Men paused to ask for guidance. We often have to do this along the way – we look to our parents, our coworkers; we look to anyone around us who seems to know what they're doing. Our pastors, our professors... But when we stop along the way, it can be tough. Even though we're seeking the Light, those that give us guidance can also be reminders of the world's darkness.

This inquiry about a new king was frightening to Herod and all Jerusalem with him. Of course the news would be a threat to Herod – Rome had already declared *him* the king of the Jews. And for those under his rule, Herod was all they knew. Surely Herod was not the most beloved ruler, but this was the way things were and Herod maintained it. He provided security for his people, generally at the expense of their freedom. He maintained the status quo so that, even if life wasn't ideal, the people could learn to cope with the way things were.

Now, we're not living under a ruthless tyrant, but we all have found ways of settling into the way things are. And it seems all of our methods do come at a cost. We seek security through success in classes and jobs that drain our time and energy so that we miss out on enjoying the rewards of our experiences. Or we sit with the hurt of a broken relationship for so long that we can't imagine life without that constant undercurrent of pain. Or maybe we're so anxious about the future – about change – that we succumb to a risk-free life, denying God's gift of options set before us and hoarding the skills and talents with which we could gift others. What we learn during Advent is how to see the way of the Lord when it comes to us. But on Epiphany, we learn that the way of the Lord that has come is our old wanderings – our own status quo – made new in the Light of Christ. We now have the option to set out in a direction that leads away from the great cost of our inwardly focused quest for security.

When the Wise Men had been gathered to Christ, they worshiped Him. This is all we can do when Christ gathers us. "They knelt down and paid him homage" and "they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." They were gathered to Christ by trusting the message of the skies and were pointed along

the way by a tyrant. They traveled an ordinary road to get to the Savior, but once they worshiped, nothing was ordinary.

In the passage from Isaiah 60 that called us to worship this morning, we learn that the light of the Lord has come to dispel the darkness that covers the earth. This light beckons all to come. Christ came first and foremost to gather. He gathers us all to Himself. And it isn't always through a miraculous, mystical event. Often times, He gathers us by an interruption of our plans; or simply an extra nudge along the way of our successes. But no matter the means by which we come to worship, once we have bowed down, once we have given of ourselves as the Wise Men gave their treasure, we find that it has always been Christ who lights the way.

It's in coming here to worship, week after week, day after day – in giving of our time and our gifts and our talents – that we are transformed and the path of our life before us is made new. The Wise Men left for their country by another road. We, like the Wise Men, no longer have to answer to the fearful ruler who whispers seductive comforts in our ears until we find ourselves settled in the darkness of the world. In worship, we have found a better option – one that overturns the status quo, one that provides the security of a savior who gave His life for us. Like the Wise Men, we come to worship by ordinary means and are shown a new ordinary – the ordinary that has been made extraordinarily holy.

I assume that this year was not your first experience with Advent. The Christmas Eve service this year was probably not the first one you ever attended and this is probably not your first Epiphany. It's also likely that after each of these services – just like every Sunday, or each day after chapel, you return after worship to normal life – you gripe over lunch about how super unfair it is that you had so much school work to do over break; you pay the bills; you plan dinner with friends or family... You're greeted with what feels like a desert of responsibilities and options before you and you have only to wander through. But wandering is okay when you know you're still on the way. Each of us comes to worship by a different path – like each of the characters in our Christmas story, we are gathered to Christ by whatever means God chooses to use. But everyone who encounters Christ leaves on a new path. The point is not that you are going to a new place – you still go home after church, you still grab a quick lunch and head to afternoon class, and you still have a long, cold winter ahead of you – but these old places now have new meaning. You don't do dinner the same way once you've encountered Emmanuel. You don't pay the bills the same way. You don't even gripe the same way. Before, you just walked the old beaten paths – a nomad, wandering through responsibilities and decisions. But now you are a pilgrim along the way.

The thing about nomads is they can't get lost – they have nowhere to go, no destination. All nomads have is the next thing – the next project, the next self-improvement plan, the next hope for security. But as pilgrims, we know we are going somewhere. We might get lost along the way. We might even have to stop and turn around (this is the definition of repentance). But the only reason we ever know that we're lost is because we know where we're going to end up.

Christ has given us a future that turns our path into the Way.

Whatever road you took into worship, remember that we always return from worship on a different road. If, like Mary and Joseph, your life has been interrupted, embrace the new life that was conceived through that interruption. Or if like the shepherds, you've had a miraculous experience of the divine, then return to your normal life, knowing that it has been made new by the inbreaking of the savior. And if, like the Wise Men, your successful life somehow drew you here, lay down your treasure – your gifts

and your successes – at the feet of Jesus. Then set out again, realizing that He has set you on a new path; a new normal – one that leads in the way everlasting.

Amen.