

The Epiphany of the Lord – B
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Kirkland, Washington
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Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6
(Matthew 2:2) Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany: Where Is the Newborn King?

Ancient Roman historians from around the time of the first century – the time of Jesus’ birth – wrote about a strange feeling of expectation that existed in their known world at that time. It was a strange feeling of expectation that a king was coming to rule the world.ⁱ The Jewish people had long believed in God’s promise to send a Messiah to save them; to lead them to victory over their oppressors.ⁱⁱ But even outside of the Jewish people, there were others in the East who also believed that powerful men from Judaea were coming to rule the world.

Contributing to this strange feeling of expectation were the accounts of people who came from the East, seeking to do homage to someone powerful and godlike. Some wise men from the East, who considered the Greek philosopher Plato to be divine, visited Athens and made sacrifices to him after his death.ⁱⁱⁱ The King of Armenia brought with him an entourage to see Emperor Nero in Rome. When he was granted an audience with the Emperor, he bowed before him saying, “I have come to you my god, worshiping you as I do the sun.”^{iv} And Augustus, the first Roman Emperor – the most powerful person in the known world at the time of Jesus’ birth – he was acclaimed as “savior of the world” for his success in expanding the Roman Empire and bringing peace to the wide lands under his control.

At the time of Jesus’ birth, all kinds of people from many places were looking for a king; more than that, they were looking for a savior.

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On today's Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, we celebrate God's promise of salvation for all people,^v and how that promise was fulfilled and revealed to the Magi from the East through the Newborn King.^{vi} In his recently published book, *Come Follow Me*, our own Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg noted that the words of the Magi during their search for the Newborn King are the first words spoken in the Gospel of Matthew: "Where is the newborn King of the Jews?"^{vii} And that these words are important because they set a theme for the rest of the Gospel of Matthew; they set a theme and a foundational question for all of us as disciples of that Newborn King.

Just like the people of Ancient Times, just like the Magi, all of us are looking for – hoping for – a King in some way. Not someone who merely has political power. No, we're looking for someone greater than that. Someone better than that. We're looking for – hoping for – someone who represents *God*. Someone who brings "God's justice, mercy, wisdom, and protection" to our world and to our lives.^{viii}

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The Magi represent this search that all of us are on – they set an example of discipleship and give encouragement to all of us in our search for God. Their journey of discipleship began with the excitement of seeing the light of the new star. But over 1200 miles and two years of journeying,^{ix} they had lost sight of the star and were unsure of where to go next.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they encountered King Herod. This was the not the King they were looking for. Perhaps they were tempted to settle for this lesser king. Maybe they thought they had been wrong to hope for the true King. But they didn't give into the temptation to give up. They recommitted, continued their journey, and were rewarded for their faithfulness when the light of the star reappeared to them and guided them to the Newborn King.^x

We don't know how the other ancient peoples felt when they encountered those whom they were looking for. We don't know how the King of Armenia felt when he prostrated himself before and worshiped Emperor Nero. We don't know how the wise men felt when they made sacrifices at Plato's tomb, or how the Romans felt putting all their hopes in Emperor Augustus as their savior. But we do know how the Magi felt when they encountered Jesus: they were overjoyed.^{xi} A literal translation of the Greek Scripture says it more superlatively: that "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."^{xii}

That is the same feeling – exceedingly great joy – that all of us are looking for – hoping for – in our lives as disciples of Christ. And we all know that we don't always have that feeling. Sometimes we are disappointed, confused, exhausted during our journey of faith. These are times when we are tempted to change course or to give up or to start looking for something else – to settle for something other than the true King.

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It seems like the feeling of exceedingly great joy came so quickly for the Magi – just a few verses in the Gospel. But their journey of faith was not quick and it was not direct. There was the excitement of the beginning: seeing the new star rising.^{xiii} There was the exceedingly great joy of the conclusion: seeing the Newborn Jesus with Mary His mother.^{xiv} In between was hundreds of miles; many months; losing sight of the star; a detour in Jerusalem; the temptation of an alternative king; and finally, a recommitment to their faith in finding the Newborn King.

"Where is the Newborn King?" was not a question that the Magi asked one time. It was a question that they asked many times throughout their long journey of faith. It is a question that all of us are called to keep on asking – many times – in our journey of faith: "Where is the Newborn King?"

Where is God in my life?
 Where is God in this situation I find myself in today?
 Where is God in my marriage or in my relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend?
 Where is God as I work on relating to my kids, or to my parents, or to another family member or friend?
 Where is God in the health difficulties that I'm having – or that my loved one is having?
 Where is God in my job search – or in my discernment of a vocation and a career?

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When we keep asking that important question: “Where is the Newborn King? Where is God in my life?” – even when it feels frustrating, disappointing, exhausting – it’s Good News! It’s Good News because it means that – like the Magi – we are still on the journey toward God. It means that we haven’t given up, settled for less, or turned back. It means that – even in darkness – God is with us, leading us “by the light of faith.”^{xv}

ⁱ William Barclay, “The Homage of the East: Matthew 2:1, 2 (continued)” in *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1 (Chapter 1 to 10), Revised Edition* (1975), 27

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 60:1-6ff

ⁱⁱⁱ Seneca, *Epistle LVIII*, 31

^{iv} Edward Champlin, *Nero* (2003), 226

^v Isaiah 60:1-6

^{vi} Matthew 2:1-12

^{vii} Daniel Mueggenborg, “Solemnity of the Epiphany” in *Come Follow Me: Discipleship Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Readings for Liturgical Year B* (2017), 27

^{viii} Mueggenborg, 27

^{ix} Walter Drum, “Magi” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia: Volume 9* (1910)

^x Matthew 2:9

^{xi} Matthew 2:10

^{xii} Greek text = ἐχάρησαν χαρὰν μεγάλην σφόδρα (they rejoiced [with] joy great exceedingly)

^{xiii} Matthew 2:2

^{xiv} Matthew 2:11

^{xv} From *The Liturgy of the Hours*, Concluding Prayer for Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer on Epiphany