

Living into the Epiphany Story

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

January 1, 2023, First Sunday after Christmas Day, Epiphany Sunday

Readings from Isaiah 60; Gospel of Thomas, 24, 70, 77 and 113; Matthew 2:1-12

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this First Sunday after Christmas and Epiphany Sunday.

On Christmas Eve we paused in the beauty of the candle-lit sanctuary to see the light shining in everyone's eyes. It was a symbol for what happens every week. We look for the light in one another, we savor it, and we join all our light together into a force of love that creates a comforting sanctuary around us even when we are apart. The power of that light shines through us into the world to do the work of Christ.

It all begins the way it did on Christmas Eve, passing from one person to another the light of our loving care and support. Please extend your light today so that even through these screens we feel lifted by it during Joys and Concerns and after the service as we linger for conversation.

Call to Worship— Epiphany comes from a Greek word that means to reveal. During the church Season of Epiphany we celebrate revelations or inspired insights of God's manifestation. We look for the Spirit at work in Jesus and in the world and in our own lives.

We need epiphany the way the Magi needed the star and dreams they followed. We need glimpses of the Spirit's presence to strengthen our faith and hope, and to keep guiding us to the light through the dark and dust of our desert journeys. We need epiphany especially at moments that are turning points when changes or challenges lie ahead. We need epiphany right now in this troubled nation and on this endangered planet. We need to know what the Spirit would have us be and do in this new time, how Christ can be born in us and revealed through us.

We can prepare ourselves to receive the epiphanies we need by self-emptying, so let us worship together wide open to all the manifestations of God's light we may find here today in the word and music and silence, and in this loving community.

Children's Time— As our children's time I am going to tell the story that we hear every year on this Sunday with a little embellishment and paraphrase.

Once long ago, in the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. These wise men were Zoroastrian priests known as Magi, and they were like wizards who studied magic. They believed in a God who made the universe, whose wisdom is deep inside all creatures and things, a God who is trying constantly to move us to bring forth our inner wisdom and light and make the earth the most peaceful, fair, loving, beautiful place it can possibly be.

The Magi saw the stars foretell the birth of a great leader who would grow up to help renew and perfect the world, so they followed the star to find this child. They could tell that the leader would be born a Jew and they thought Jesus must be a prince, so they went to King Herod.

Herod got worried that Jesus would lead a revolution and overthrow him, so he asked the Magi to tell him when they found the child so he could honor Jesus, but really he wanted to stop Jesus from growing up and fulfilling his calling.

The Magi found Jesus in Bethlehem and bowed down and presented him with gifts. These were not gifts of kings, they were gifts of Zoroastrian wizards who wanted to save the world, so they gave Jesus gifts symbolizing the mastery he would have over certain things—gold, and Jesus overcame greed and taught about a wise relationship to money; frankincense, which was associated with God's presence, and Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit's power and wisdom; and myrrh, which was associated with easing suffering and death, and Jesus was a master at creating new life out of suffering and death.

A dream warned the Magi not to go back to King Herod, but to go home by another way. Herod failed to stop Jesus, so Jesus grew up to teach us that we all have God's presence and Spirit in us. He called us to bring forth our gifts and our own areas of mastery (teaching or singing or baking or listening or lovingkindness or infinite other gifts) to help save the world.

That's a big job, but there's something we can always do that helps us find the Spirit of Christ within us and shine its light more brightly... Pray! Let us say together the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer...

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Christmas wisdom says that we each have a Christ child within us waiting to be born anew in every moment or stage of our life, to help us meet the need of any situation, whether in our family, circle of friends, church, town, nation or world, or in some creative work of our own.

Can you think of a situation or project, small or large, that could benefit from you bringing Christ-like gifts to it?

To have Christ be born in us means that we let the Spirit of the universe that filled Jesus fill us, a transformative Spirit inspiring actions of oneness and love, and justice and peace. The Spirit evolves life on earth by working through individuals as building blocks of collective change. The more endangered that life on earth is, the more urgently the Spirit seeks to work through us to bring Christ-like gifts into situations and relationships.

Jesus said in the Gospel of Thomas, “There is light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark.... If you bring forth what is within you, it will save you; if you do not find and bring forth what is within you, it will destroy you.”

The Spirit of light and life and love that we see shining brilliantly from Jesus is in us all, and our life-long task is to keep bringing it out to transform the world around us.

The first and biggest question for us each to answer in our heart right now is, will you bring forth what is within you? Jesus says that it is a matter of life or death for you and for the world. Nothing could be more important, whatever situation you face.

If your answer is yes, then the next question is, how exactly does the Spirit want to work through you now? Do you know?

The story of the Magi can help us discern this, so I would like to lead you through a guided reflection on your life using the main characters as universal archetypes that play a role in every effort to bring forth the light that is within us.

So I invite you to get a piece of paper and pencil or use whatever device works for you to jot some notes as I pose three questions. We are going to brainstorm, letting whatever comes to mind to flow out, not filtering it or judging it, just letting the Spirit move us. There are no wrong answers and you do not have to share—this is for you, although sharing it may be important to help you gain clarity or keep your resolve.

So first, the role of the Magi archetype in your story: who are the Magi in your life? Who has recognized the Christ or Spirit in you, who has seen your true self with your calling and gifts and named the goodness in you? What people you know or what published writers or artists have helped you grow in the direction of being more Spirit filled and more your true self? What parent or grandparent or family member, what friends or partners, what teachers or counselors, what

bosses or co-workers or mentors or random angels have been like magi to you, bearing gifts of some kind to help you fulfill your calling?

Take a couple minutes and write notes of whatever or whoever comes to mind as your own Magi...

Second, the role of the Christ-child archetype in your story: if Magi were here on New Years Day 2023, what would they see that the Spirit is calling you to be or do now? What specific Christ-like gifts do you need to bring forth in order to help the situations that concern you most? This is a “What would Jesus do?” question, but what would he do if he were you as you are, your true, unique self, in your situation?

Take a few minutes and write whatever comes to your heart about what the Spirit may be calling you to be or do...

And third the Herod archetype, and for this, please forget the personal hideousness of Herod and think only of his role in the story: what opposes you, what are the obstacles you need to overcome, what distracts you or could get in the way of you doing what the Spirit and world need you to do? What could stop you from this calling that will give your life meaning, purpose and joy?

It doesn't have to be a brutal tyrant that fills this role, it could be someone who simply opposes our ideas or way of being, or a caring friend or family member who does not understand us, or even someone who persuades us to do one-too-many good things with the result that we have no time or energy for what the Spirit is really calling us to do.

Some of the most brutal are our own inner Herods, the judging, belittling voices of self-loathing that blaspheme the Spirit within us and say no when the Spirit is begging us to say yes, but we also have inner Magi who read the stars and listen to angels and dreams, and our success depends on choosing their side in our own story.

So take a couple of minutes to write down whatever inner or outer force could block you from letting yourself fulfill the Spirit's mission for you in the coming year...

Your homework tonight is to look at the obstacles or opposing forces and brainstorm solutions to each one, ways that you can get through or around them so they do not stop you.

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The last line of the story of the Magi says. “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” In the very next verse, an angel comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him to flee to Egypt with Jesus and Mary to escape Herod.

We may be called to confront forces that oppose the Spirit of light and life and love, but we may also be called simply to go home by another road, to do an end-around run, to ignore or disobey the voice that says no and turn to focus entirely on living our yes. It is that yes that the Magi will celebrate. It is our yes that will change us and the world around us. As Isaiah said,

Arise, shine; for your light has come...
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice.

Let us pray in silence, inviting the Spirit to shine that light through us this year...

Two Haiku by Mel Goertz:

This chickadee who comes
to my hand to pluck up a seed—
Are we kin?

The rising sun,
sky as pink as petunias
yesterday was gray.