

## Recognizing the Light

Within these two events, the visit of travelers from the east and the testimony of his cousin which appear on our church calendar as our celebration of Jesus' birth come to a close are connected through the theme of God's light coming into our dark world and the difficulty in recognizing the light among us. Matthew's account is the only gospel which gives us the story of the news of the Messiah's arrival was announced to the broader world beyond those shepherds keeping watch in local fields. We often focus on that aspect of the inclusion of those folks, almost certainly folks not descended from Abraham. We view this new star in the sky as God's way of announcing the Messiah's birth to the wider world. However, Matthew included very few details about them, just that they must have been close students of the night sky and the position of the heavenly features. The Greek word used to identify them was Magi...which is often translated for us as wise men or kings but would not have been the way the term was understood to those of that time. Matthew only tells us they came from the East, so some speculate they were priest of the religion known as Zoroaster because ancient writers often used the term in connection with religion and ritual. Some interpreters just view them as astrologers. The ancient texts speak of Magi in two ways: as magicians or as ones able to read signs and have visions. Matthew's account lack of details lends itself to understanding them as ones with the ability to see signs and have visions, but the lack of information about them leaves them as mysterious visitors whose insight is not widely known. The entirety of their visit is described in twelve verses...they begin and end the visit following that star, yet take a nine mile detour into Jerusalem to visit with Herod; after receiving information from Herod and telling him when they had first seen the star, they finished their journey by again following the star, but not going back to Herod with any more information. God protects the infant Jesus through warnings to both the Magi not to go back and Joseph to get up and flee the area, but the aftermath of the Magi's visit to Herod demonstrates that arrival of Jesus into the world will be met with hostility. In fact, only Matthew and Luke tell us anything about Jesus' birth. Only Matthew gives us a clue that this arrival will be met with hostility when he describes Herod's reaction. None of the gospels were written as events unfolded but were composed beginning about 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection; they were written as the early believers realized that Jesus' return was not going to be as soon as they had hoped and believed. They began recording the narrative as those who had witnessed it began to die so that the truth would not be lost to time. We rarely consider that Matthew did spend the same amount of narrative space on the hostile result of their visit to the scene as was spent introducing them into the narrative in the first place. Herod's fearful and hostile reaction is also rendered in twelve verses. Neither the shepherd's amazement and acceptance nor the honoring given by the Magi seems to have been widely noticed at the time. The ancient records, apart from Matthew do not provide support for the massacre of the innocents so examination of the text as we have received it shows Matthew giving an equal weight to God's move to redeem and humanities resistance. When we look around our world both of these forces are still at play...God's shining a light into our darkness and the desire for many to resist coming into the light. We name this time of the year after the description given of the Magi's journey— Epiphany. The meaning of the word in Greek is appearing or revealing. The appearance of the star revealed God's action to those from the East. As we continue on a path of discipleship, do

we experience an epiphany? In Celtic Christianity, the Epiphany stories are stories of “thin places”, places where the boundary between the mundane of the world and the eternal becomes permeable. God parts the curtain, and we can catch glimpses of God’s love, majesty and power. Epiphany calls us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary, the mundane of our daily experiences to discover the extraordinary possibilities found when we seek to see God in our midst. We are called to look deeply at Jesus, his life and teachings and see God. We often have a problem with this...not having discovered a portentous star in the East, nor have we been present at Jesus’ baptism to see the Spirit descent like a dove, or hear a divine Voice from the cloud make the pronouncement identifying Jesus as the “beloved.” This is true of the other signs found in scripture about Jesus...we read but do not experience them ourselves. Though many of us have been members of the church, the body of Christ all of our lives...or at least all of the portion which we remember most of us have not experienced that presence described in the readings of Epiphany. As St. John describes it: “I belong to “a people who walk in darkness.” Although we profess a belief in a self-revealing God, we often experience God as silent or hidden from view. So when we stand at the edges of this week’s reading of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism—how do we see what we hear. Do we bridge the gap between an ancient voice and a modern silence? Heaven opened. A dove descended. God spoke. Do we accept this literally? If we do, then we are plunged into a sea of hard questions. If God spoke audibly in the past, why doesn’t God do so now? If God does, why haven’t we heard? Does that mean God is angry? Has God retreated from this world? Changed? Left? If we consider the ancient stories of Epiphany figurative or metaphors, how does that change our ability to experience an Epiphany? Are we embarrassed to admit believing in miracles? Every age has signature difficulties with faith. The ones of the early church were different...they had no problem with the miraculous, with doves or the divine voice, but instead had problems of a different sort with Jesus’ baptism. Early believers were scandalized that the Messiah would place himself under the tutelage of a rabble rouser like John? That God’s incarnate Son would receive a baptism of repentance? The Perfect, untouchable Jesus? What was he doing in the murky water of the Jordan, aligning himself with the great unwashed world of sinners? Why did God look down at the very start of the ministry of Jesus and call him beloved...well before Jesus had accomplished a single thing worth praising? What do these two views of what we learn from scripture tell us about how we find and see the Light? What if we present these things a little differently: what do we find most impossible to believe for our own lives? Is it that God appears in our world by means so familiar we often miss it? That our baptisms bind us to all of humanity—not in theory, but in the flesh—such that you and I are kin, kin of all others, responsible for each other in ways we fail too often to honor? Or that we are indeed God’s beloved—not because we’ve done anything to earn it, but because our God insists on blessing us with acceptance? The real problem with Epiphany is that we each individually have a choice—and most of the time, we don’t want it. We expect God’s revelations to bowl us over...we want the thin places connecting us to God to dominate our landscapes so that we have no choice...so that we are left choice-less, sinless, powerless. Freed of all doubts and spilling over with faith. But that’s not God’s way. God has not insulted humanity with so little agency; we get to choose. No matter how many times God shows up in our lives, we are free to ignore God’s presence. No matter how often we are shown that we are beloved, we can choose self-loathing instead. No matter how many times we remember our baptism, we are

free to dredge out of the baptismal waters the very drudge we first throw in. No matter how often we affirm our vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, we are at liberty to reject others and walk away from their need. The stories found during the season of Epiphany are stories of light, and yet often, they end in shadow. The visitation of the Magi leads to the slaughter of the innocents. Jesus' baptism drives him directly into the wilderness of temptation and testing. Soon after he's transfigured, he dies. There is no indication anywhere in scripture that revelation leads to the fairy tale ending of happily ever after. It is quite possible to stand in the white center of a thin place and see nothing beyond our own ego. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it all was so clear...where what is holy was evident to all. That the thin places of the world were self-evident...where the thin place is a neighborhood, a forest, a hilltop easily seen; where God's voice would sound clear in the wind, thunder...easy to hear and read. But there is no magic involved in this...we must practice Epiphany. That challenge is always before us: to look, to look again; to look harder; to see freshly so we can stand in the place that might possibly be thin and regardless of how cynical we might feel, cling to the possibility that God will reach across to us and surprise us. Epiphany is deep water—you can't stand on the shore to just dip your toes in. You must take a deep breath and dive in. Baptism promises new life, but it always kills before it resurrects. Jesus told Nicodemis he had to be born again. Upon what do we center our hope? Marcus Borg, a New Testament scholar suggest that Jesus himself is our thin place. He's the one who opens the barrier, and shows us the God we long to know. He's the one who stands in line with us at the water's edge, willing to immerse himself in shame, scandal, repentance and pain, all so that we might hear the only voice that can tell us who we are and whose we are in this sacred season. Listen. That is how we recognize the Light we have been given. We are God's own. God's children. God's delight. Even in the deepest water, we are God's beloved. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.