

By Another Road  
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**Isaiah 60:1-6**

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
2 For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the Lord will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.  
3 Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
  
4 Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.  
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

**Matthew 2:1-12**

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:  
<sup>6</sup> "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '  
<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' <sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“Take another road to another place / disappear without a trace.” These words to a Jimmy Buffett song have been going through my head for days now. I can’t help but think they suit the wise men who came to find the “new king” and, on their way, asked the “old king” for directions. A dream told them not to go back to Herod (who also now wanted to find this new king) so they took another road and disappeared.

We call today “Epiphany,” which means appearance. For the wise men, this included the appearance of the star which heralded the appearance of the Christ child. Epiphany is not unlike theophany – both words have in their roots the meaning “to show” or “to appear.” Theophany is when God makes an appearance; epiphany is when God makes an appearance in the being of Jesus. If you’ve ever seen the movie “Evan Almighty,” Morgan Freeman in the backseat of Steve Carell’s car is a theophany; in the George Burns “Oh God” movies, any time George is around is a theophany.

Epiphany, well, epiphany is why we gather every week. As our denomination defines it:

Epiphany is the celebration of God’s manifestation or self-revelation to the world in Jesus Christ. In particular, we celebrate the revelation of God’s promise and purpose to the nations of the world, as the magi came from the East to worship to the Christ child, and God’s covenant of grace is extended to all who believe the good news of Christ Jesus. The symbolism of light is important: not only because of the star that guided the magi, but as it relates to the bright dawning of God’s self-revelation in Christ...Christmas marks the coming of God to us; Epiphany celebrates the appearance of the Lord in the midst of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Revelation happens throughout the Bible, through theophany and epiphany, in myriad ways, uniquely viewed by each unique person doing the viewing. Kendra G. Hotz references theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, saying he “likens revelation to a moment when we are reading” in his words “a ‘difficult book, seeking to follow a complicated argument, [and] we come across a luminous sentence from which we can go forward and backward and so attain some understanding of the whole.’” She continues her own thoughts saying, “The same might be said for an epiphany. There comes some moment when an important truth suddenly becomes clear, and we can reinterpret our past and rethink our way forward in light of it. At Epiphany...we come to one of those moments when an event, the first revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, grabs hold of us and changes everything. Now the past makes sudden sense; now the future calls for a new direction.”<sup>2</sup>

Theophany and epiphany bleed together, even coexist, just as the three persons of the trinity, God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, coexist in all times and for all purposes. Remember our wise men who left by another road? They did so because they were warned in a dream. Sometimes, the Bible is

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/epiphany/>

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 194.

specific in saying an angel appeared to someone (or someones) in a dream to pass along a message from God. And often, when the angel of the Lord appears to someone, there is no separation between the angel of the Lord and God's very self. Not only is the light of the star coexisting with the luminosity of Christ but this same experience for the wise men includes an appearance by God through a dream, sending them somewhere other than where they planned. In short, encountering Christ has changed them, has changed their futures. Encountering Christ has grabbed hold of them, has changed everything. Their futures demand a new direction.

Theophany and epiphany are church words; in *your* words, can you describe a time when you have encountered God, encountered Christ, encountered the Holy Spirit, changing your future and shedding new light on your past? Kendra Hotz and others point out that we are celebrating Christ's revelation to Gentiles. Christ, king of the Jews, is revealed to non-Jews, who were led to him by the heavens themselves. Epiphany, the event we celebrate today, happened in an unexpected way to unexpected people. In *your* words, when has Christ been revealed to you in unexpected ways? Where has there been providence? Coincidence? Fortuitousness?

Or maybe you were following a star through the crowds and the chaos and the desert places and didn't even know it until you saw that the star had stopped, until you were overwhelmed with joy in that moment. We celebrate a moment when the lives of the wise men, Mary, and Jesus converge but Epiphany is not limited to them or to that very specific time. As our denomination explains, "Epiphany is the celebration of God's manifestation or self-revelation to the world in Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup> God's manifestation happens many times in human lives, and even more when we're actively watching. In *your* words, can you name a desert place in your life and point to the star which changed your future?

I've shared before how I came to be seeking a call, how I found myself looking for a church that would also be looking for me. I don't think I've shared before about the church that wasn't looking for me. Before I even parted ways with the church in Winnetka, someone had suggested I consider applying at another church. And not just any church but a church that was ten minutes from home, not an hour and ten minutes, ten minutes from my home. I figured I could use the interviewing experience and applied. I was grateful to learn they wanted to interview me and, with every bit of research I did and every step in the interview process, I got more and more excited, thinking God had brought us together – the perfect match at the perfect time in the perfect location. As I became one of the final three candidates for the Associate Pastor for Youth position, I wanted badly to believe I was sure to be the pick. I even had a dream, and I'm not kidding here, in which I received reassurance not to worry as I

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/epiphany/>

waited to hear their decision. I, of course, took this as the sign I wanted it to be – that God was assuring me that the position would be mine.

It's not hard to deduce that the call was not extended to me. And for months, I was disappointed. I thought the dream had been a concoction of my own mind. But I realize now the only concoction was my interpretation of the dream. Indeed, in the dream I was reassured not to worry – I now realize not because I was going to that church but because you were waiting, because you would be looking for me when I was looking for you. There were desert months in between, crowds and chaos, and just three days shy of two years ago, I suddenly saw the star when I came to visit this church. I was overwhelmed with joy and I took another road. And I continue to be overwhelmed with joy with every little epiphany and theophany and moment when I see God at work here and when God touches me through one of you.

Every desert place has a star at the end which leads us on another road. The wise men didn't really disappear without a trace, but who they were before Bethlehem was transformed when they were touched by God. For those of you who entered this year in the desert, have hope. Remember the other deserts, remember the other stars, and trust that this desert has a star as well. And for those of you who entered this year beholding the star, may you always keep it in sight as you begin down another road. For upon us all the glory of the Lord has risen. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: God with us, overwhelm us with joy this day, we pray. Amen.