

January 4, 2014 “Epiphany” Heaven Come Down V  
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Good morning on this first Sunday of 2015--Ephiphany Sunday. Epiphany is one of those words that risks being just another weird church word. Here's what it means. Think with me of when you realized something that changed your life. When you said hey, I don't just *like* doing this, I want to do it for a living. Guitar. Construction. Building bridges. Investing money. Whatever it is. That was a moment of Epiphany. Light shone and you saw things for what they were, you saw you for who you are. Or think when you realized hey wait, I don't just *like* this person, I don't just love them, I want to be with them forever, I want to be a new me with them. That's an Epiphany. Or this I hope most of all. Think when you realized hey, Jesus isn't just interesting, he's not just a great teacher, he's Lord of the universe, I want to be a new me in relationship to him through his church. Epiphany. Light shone.

That's what epiphany means. It means *light shines*. What you couldn't see before you can see now and suddenly everything is different. An Epiphany can be something silly. I remember my first cup of Starbucks coffee (forgive the product placement), all other coffee seemed less coffee after (there's a reason—10 times as much caffeine as in one can of coke). Or an Epiphany can be more significant. A friend realized he wanted to teach at Notre Dame because he wanted to be buried in the school's cemetery. To be wed to a patch of earth and spend his whole life in one acre until his body is planted there. Who knows what can grow? I remember distinctly when I heard myself say for the millionth time “God does his best saving work in the local church.” I realized, wait, why am I saying that and working someplace else? Who wouldn't want to be where God is doing his best saving work? Called the bishop the next day.

The story I'm about to read is the lectionary text assigned for Epiphany Sunday. It fits perfectly with our Heaven Come Down series—God is among us, in our guts, in our hearts, in our neighborhood. Isaiah tells refugees returning to Jerusalem they should take heart. Sure God's city is a ruin, its walls thrown down, towers vanished, no temple. But Jerusalem *will be* restored. People from all nations will stream to it with gifts. It will become the center of the world economy. And the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Hear this from the book you love.

Isaiah 60:1-6

*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.*

This is the word of God, for the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Three points for today, one, all people come, two they bear strange gifts, and three they worship a strange king. Point one, all people come.

The three wise men from the east are usually thought of as Christmas characters. They're part of the nativity plays—my *favorite* part, ill fitting costumes that kids trip over with crowns too big, bringing gifts to the Christ child. But in the church's *memory* they're more associated with Epiphany than with Christmas. Lots

of Christian cultures give gifts to one another on January 6<sup>th</sup>, *not* December 25. That's the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, Epiphany day, when the wise men arrived with their gifts.

The wise men are an Epiphany. They are light shining on who this child is and how the world will never be the same. They come from the east. That is, they are not Jews. They follow some other religion. One where they divine meaning from the stars. If you notice in the bible there's not a lot said about the stars. The Jews don't learn about God from stars the way Greeks or other pagans do. They learn about God from scripture, from following God's law, from loving God and neighbor. And these magi divine about god from stars. And they learn something from those stars that God's own people are slow to learn from their bible. That God is the baby in the manger.

This may be the most successful event of evangelism in all history. Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and the angels didn't send out messengers. No one did. These folks just came following their faith to Jesus. They're illumined by a God they weren't seeking. The Isaiah text prophesies that kings will come from Midian, from Ephah. Those are Israel's historic enemies, the Midianites. Israel is constantly fighting with them. They're also cousins, descended from Abraham. Anyone who's just been with family over the holidays gets this, family is what harms you, you love them and you fight with them. Sheba is in Africa. The Queen of Sheba was the Queen of Ethiopia, one of Solomon's wives. Sheba was the farthest away people Israel knew about. It's also in the wrong direction, west not east. Never mind. Isaiah's point, Matthew's point, the church's point, is that people will come from *all* nations, all directions, to worship Israel's God. And arriving at the manger they do just that. One of the kings is traditionally depicted as African, the other two as enemies. Here is a whole row of soldiers, depicted in medieval armor of the artist's time but never mind, the point is clear. Israel's enemies are marshalling not for attack, but to kneel, and to adore this child.

What does all this mean? *All* come. *All* do. I love this image of the adoration of the magi. The whole village approaches on its knees. You can hardly see the Christ child or any of the holy family because the point of view is so wide angle. The point is that all people worship. Our mission as a church is born of such moments, "Loving our community and inviting all to discover life in Christ." All people are most human when we kneel in Christ's presence. That's why we do missions. That's why we invite our neighbors, especially those most unlike us. Why we need rich and poor all races in here. Pentecost doesn't start at Pentecost. It starts in Isaiah and Jesus gives us a glimpse of it as an infant. One day all nations will bow. The church shows that in advance.

Two subpoints here. One, other religions. How do we balance being respectful of other religions with doing mission work? I know some people don't care about one or the other of these. Some think other religions are great, why mess with them? We have enough problems, and Christians have often been awful dealing with other religions, we've taken up weapons to convert them and betrayed the peaceful Jesus. Sure, we have to be respectful. Epiphany shows us why. These non-Jewish wise men see something Israel doesn't see. *That's* why we're to be respectful. It's a *biblical* command. Sometimes others can see things *we* can't. And we shouldn't be surprised. God is not stingy with his gifts. God has sprinkled signs of himself in all creation, in the stars even, in pagans' hearts, in their stories and songs. When I'm learning about another faith, whether Muslim or Cherokee or whatever, I'm on the lookout for signs of Jesus. Because they're there. Somehow the African masks make this point perfectly, kings from all over coming with their particular cultural gifts. And, subpoint two, some others won't like this part, and, other religions are incomplete. These wise men don't stay in the east. They come and kneel in Bethlehem. They give their gifts to this child, the source of all gifts. The need to be respectful of other faiths doesn't mean not to tell about our own, in fact, arrogant as this sounds, *this* child rules and all will kneel one day. The best life now is to kneel now. That's what we do in church. All people will one day join us. For some it will be torture to kneel. Their backs are too straight and their knees

too stiff from worshipping nothing but themselves. For us who've practiced it will be heaven to kneel. And we will never tire of it.

Let me give you this quote from a certain St. Isaac the Syrian, a monk thinking about God's compassion for those far outside the church.

And what is a merciful heart? It is the heart's burning desire for men, for birds, for animals, and even for demons. At the remembrance and at the sight of them, the merciful man's eyes fill with tears which arise at the great compassion that urges his heart. It grows tender and cannot endure hearing or seeing any injury or slight sorrow for anything in creation. . . Such a one continually offers tearful prayers, even for irrational animals and for enemies of truth and all who harm it, that they may be guarded and forgiven.

Two, they come with strange gifts. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. I'm tempted to ask you what the strangest gift you've ever gotten was. The ugliest sweater. Are you thinking of one? Gifts are strange things. They obligate us. Colin Firth in *Bridget Jones's Diary* has to wear his mom's sweater, no choice. I love giving books, the problem is people feel obliged to read them, I have no objection to this, sometimes others do. Gold, frankincense, myrrh. What does a baby need with these? A baby needs a rattle, a blanket, and lots of love. Perhaps what a baby really needs is wet wipes. Millions of them. Because a baby produces more bodily fluids than its birth weight every day.<sup>i</sup> For real. How did people survive before wet wipes?! Gold, frankincense, and myrrh, not so helpful. One medieval English poet imagines the wise men bringing Jesus a parakeet, a bowl of cherries, and a tennis ball. Useless gifts. Some in the church have imagined these precious gifts went to fund the holy family's escape to Egypt. Herod wants to kill the child, gold and costly incense and perfume can be sold and go a long way to preserve the child's life. Could be. It's a little utilitarian for me. I prefer to imagine the gifts as useless. To Jesus. Worth everything. To the kings. And I wonder this, how can we take what's most precious to us and lay it at Jesus' feet?

The church is the company of those who lay everything at Jesus' feet. And what we give him can look very different, and make for strange friends. I'm reading a Christmas gift that wasn't useless, it's on urban exploration, and it's called *Explore Everything: Place Hacking the City*. It's about kids with too much time and money and not enough sense who spends them exploring sewers and closed subway lines and abandoned buildings. They take pictures and post them. They don't break anything; they just chronicle life off limits. Some of the most reckless explore dangerous places like Chernobyl or power stations, places authorities are right to want to keep them away. I couldn't figure out why I was interested in this till I saw this, the author says it's not so much the places they're interested in, though it's cool to see all the bones in the Paris catacombs. It's each other, and danger. They want an identity, a tribe, to be part of a risk taking group of people who speak an alternative language and support one another. And now they have it. They're urban explorers. The rest of us can't understand and don't trust them and they don't care.

The church is the company of those who bring our gifts, vastly different as they are, to this newborn king. Imagine Joseph and Mary, Jewish, poor, provincial, thrust on to the world stage, and a king from Africa, another from Iraq, another from Israel's worst enemy, having to stay together and pass a budget? Choose songs for Sunday? Bring casseroles to one another when they're sick? That's what we have to do—church! And it's harder than simply dropping off gifts and leaving. In church we bring our whole selves and stay with all those who stay. It's hard, and bumpy, and it makes us a tribe, somebody different from the world, someone the world can't understand, and may not trust or like. And we're a witness to a God who loves the world and comes to save it.

Point three; these gifts are for a strange king. My favorite Christmas hymn is actually an Epiphany hymn, "We Three Kings." It announces beautifully what these three gifts mean. The first, gold, a kingly gift. "King forever ceasing never over us all to reign," the song sings. Gold is universally admired for being beautiful and stretchy, malleable. And the bible says it paves the streets in heaven. What's a treasure for us for God is commonplace, like dirt here. Frankincense the second has, "incense owns a deity nigh," the king sings. You light *incense* in the presence of a God. "Let my prayer be to you as incense," the psalmist asks. "Prayer and praising, voices raising, worshiping God on high." Kings get born all the time, politicians too. Just being in west Texas I remember a friend asking when did Texas politicians start looking like preachers, and preachers like west Texas politicians? But God is only born once in flesh, once ever. He wants to be born again in each of our hearts. And third, myrrh. Notice our text from Isaiah says this, "*They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*" No myrrh. Myrrh is a sign of death. It's what's used to anoint a dead body. In the ancient world tombs were family affairs. Part of a funeral would happen in the family tomb. Anointing the bodies was essential. You had to sit with them. No myrrh in Isaiah as if to say, sure we saw God coming. We saw him being king. We didn't foresee him *dying*. This image suggests that, the one to whom the magi bring gifts is destined for a cross. "Sealed in stone cold tomb," the song sings.

The story doesn't end there. It never ends. Come back Easter for more details.

There is an old Methodist tradition for the New Year called the watch night. Wesley wanted to right the wrong Jesus' first disciples did by having the Methodist disciples stay up with Jesus and pray. This would bring the New Year in bathed and soaked in prayer, with us on our knees, where disciples should be in worship. I want to give this gift to you, a gift you can give back to God. It's called the Wesley Covenant Prayer. It sets the stage for us for a year of grace, bringing all we have to Jesus, like the magi on the first Epiphany. Let's pray it together shall we? Forgive the old English.

I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Thou art mine, and I am thine.  
So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
Let it be ratified in heaven.  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Taking this from an article off slate.com.