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Do Ephanias Still Happen?

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:7-12; Matthew 2:1-12

The visit of the Magi has all the elements of a good story. Strangers bearing gifts appear unannounced from an exotic, faraway land. They're on a mysterious mission. We marvel at their nocturnal navigation.

No wonder we love this story.

There's treachery and danger when King Herod lies to the Magi and tries to set them up. There's heroism when the Magi ignore the king and leave by another way. And, most of all there's a major reveal of surprising good news at the heart of it all.

That good news, of course, is why we're here today, and why the church has thrived in every age. We are "stewards of the mysteries of God," as the Apostle Paul writes of followers of Jesus. That stewardship, in his view, is the center of the church's work: "To make everyone see," as Paul says,

“What is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.” (Ephesians 3:19-11)

Faith is the gift that opens us to the great mystery of the ages.

We should not underestimate the role of the star in the Magi story. It's the light the prophet says will never be covered by darkness. It signals the way to what is about to be revealed.

Can we imagine the Magi without the star? What would have drawn them to Bethlehem and lit the way to the incarnation? Would they even have set out in the darkness for an unknown destination? Without the star there are no wise ones from the east.

The star is the one part of the story we can still see today. I went out onto the middle of a frozen Lake Harriet a few nights ago and stood for a long time staring up at the heavens. Who among us has not done that – gazed into the night sky and pondered ultimate things? *No wonder the Magi traveled in the night.*

It was a clear sky that night above Lake Harriet, and even standing in the middle of a well-lit city, I could see them – the same stars that would have guided the Magi long ago, pointing to mysteries that would no longer be hidden one day.

The church calls the Magi story *Epiphany*, meaning “something that has been revealed by light.” On the calendar Epiphany is

twelve days after Christmas, but it's likely the visit of the Magi would have taken place much later than that. Our Christmas pageant this year acknowledged that timing issue in the nativity narrative: it had both a *baby* Jesus, for the shepherds, and a *toddler* Jesus, for the Magi. And, of course, as does every pageant, it had a *star*, because the story needs light for the epiphany.

Epiphanies aren't reserved solely for Magi. Revelations of hidden things continue to happen and surprise people throughout scripture, and open their eyes to God among them. Think of Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree whose life is turned around as he realizes who Jesus is as he climbs down. Or the woman at the well when Jesus offers her living water. Or the two men whose "eyes were opened" when he breaks bread, as we will do this morning.

Perhaps the best known biblical epiphany is the flash of light that knocks Saul to the ground and then slowly opens his eyes to the truth about Jesus, making him into the Apostle Paul.

But epiphanies aren't limited solely to the Bible. Julian of Norwich, the medieval mystic, wrote *The Revelations of Divine Love*. It's an account of the multiple epiphanies in her life. She looks at a hazelnut in her hand, for instance, and in that hazelnut sees everything God has made. "In this little thing," she writes, "I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it."

(<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2012/05/08/quotations-from-st-julian-of-norwich/>)

In that tiny hazelnut she saw God's love for all of life, and for her, and it transformed her. Her eyes were opened.

If the question is *do epiphanies still happen?* the answer must surely be a resounding yes. Our spiritual life depends on them.

Epiphanies are those moments when God's intentions for our lives become clear, when what was hidden is revealed. Such experiences are fuel for the fire of faith. Sometimes epiphanies come in a blazing moment...but more typically they happened slowly, painstakingly, sometime painfully, as they unfold over time.

I received a tender Christmas letter from a man who lost his wife of many years last January; by December, he wrote, he had come to see *the light that was her life* through the shadows of sorrow which he still bore. A church member described to me the unexpected loss of a loved one that he was beginning to understand as a gift, because of what has opened in his life with a heart torn apart by grief. A couple told me that a frightening diagnosis had suddenly converted every day for them into an intensely vivid experience of the love between two people, and had heightened their trust in a love greater than either of them.

Epiphanies do happen. They sustain our faith. They open our eyes.

Early in my ministry in another city, local faith communities were asked by the mayor to use their buildings to help during a homelessness crisis. I brought the idea to the monthly meeting of

the church elders and asked if we should open our doors to those who needed a place to sleep.

A lively discussion followed, with some arguing that it was a gospel imperative to welcome strangers in need, and others cautioning that it could be unsafe or destructive, especially since the space had recently been renovated and was new and looked so nice...!

It was quite a debate. Two respected, influential elders who often did not agree with one another led the opposition: Joe, a retired boxer, and Henry, a retired businessman. They both stood up to speak and make impassioned arguments against inviting strangers into the building to sleep.

The boxer and the businessman were the only “no” votes that night, but like good Presbyterian elders, they both showed up to volunteer when the first family moved into the fellowship hall. We hosted that family for two weeks, and then another family, and then another, for several more weeks. Joe and Henry were there helping many nights.

About six months later, at another meeting of the church board, Joe and Henry stood up and asked to speak. They each said they realized they had been wrong to oppose the church opening its doors to those who needed a place to sleep. Like two latter day Magi, they gave moving testimonies to how their faith had been made deeper and broader because of what they had seen and

experienced. They had been changed as they served God by helping families in need.

They didn't use the word, but they had experienced an *epiphany*. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

"Arise, shine," the prophet says, "For your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." (Isaiah 60:1)

The church is in the epiphany business. We exist in order to lead people to mysteries that can be revealed – chief among them, the incarnation of God's love and justice among us in the world, in the person of Jesus. Epiphany gives us purpose. We follow the light, and then we do our best to lead others to it.

There could not be a better day for Westminster to celebrate thirty years of the Meisel Scholars program than Epiphany. Don Meisel, the senior minister here from 1972 to 1992, his wife Ellie and church members, began the program as a way to support college students in their vocational discernment. Over the years dozens of young people have participated. The program has served its purpose well. Students have found their life calling – or having tested the waters, students have discerned that their vocational path lies elsewhere.

Discernment is a way to describe a *slow, rolling epiphany*, an unfolding of that which is hidden. I know from my own vocational experience it can take time to find our direction in life – and sometimes that calling change. The Meisel Scholars

program is designed to encourage a kind of star-following exploration that leads to epiphany. It's important to pay attention when you're walking in the dark.

One student went to Eastern Europe as a Meisel scholar to record oral histories in tiny villages; today she's a Peabody-award-winning producer of radio stories. Another student used a Meisel grant to go to a Presbyterian program called "Clean Water U" where he learned about installing water filtration systems and then traveled to Cuba to put his training to work - and now he's headed to Central America as a Peace Corps volunteer to work on water purification projects.

Over the years we've even developed a new vocabulary: students "do a Meisel." Each of our three children "did a Meisel."

One student used his Meisel grant to do community organizing and now runs a successful urban place-making company. Another did an internship with the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition, an interfaith lobbying group at the Statehouse, and is now an activist for affordable housing.

Meisel scholars are part of the continuing entourage moving with the wise ones from the east on a journey of discernment - in fact, that includes all of us. *All of us* are seeking that which is hidden from sight, but which eventually will be made known. That is the life of faith, the way of the church.

From the Magi we learn to trust the light, to take our time, and then to hold fast to what we seek when we find it, be it love, or hope, or courage, or trust, or direction in life, or forgiveness, or some other deep need.

Do epiphanies still happen? Yes, they do, if we let them, if we're open to them. In fact, our faith depends on them. And God will offer them to us.

Let us watch closely as we move together through the night.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.