

Last Sunday, many churches celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany. It's called the Feast of the Epiphany because "epiphany" means "manifestation" or "showing forth" in Greek. It celebrates the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God to the world, primarily through the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus, symbolizing his divine nature revealed to all people, not just the Jews. It is important to keep in mind that the Light is for everybody: Christians, Jews, Moslems, Hindus, atheists, nice people, jerks, you name it. Believe it or not, even politicians in spite of the fact that the only difference between a flying Jack Ass and a politician is take out the f. Sorry, my bad. There I go. Mentioning politics.

Matthew 2: 1-12 *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:*

*"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."*^[b]

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

If you get stuck at the literal, historical level then you will miss much of the symbolism and power of the text. It will end up being a beautiful story that instills warm fuzzy feelings of sentimentality. It ends up being a Hallmark Card. The important question is, "What does it mean? Does it ask anything of me?" First the magi. They have been called kings and there were three of them. None of that is mentioned in the text but I don't think those assumptions do any harm. A good description would be astrologers. They were the scientists of the day and

probably well educated. Most importantly they were seekers willing to take risks, go to new lands, cross borders to find something mysterious. Something that they knew was beyond them. These men had been looking at the stars every night for years in anticipation of what they knew not and when it appears they drop everything to go to it. They were obviously not Jews, so they were outsiders. The message would be seen as subversive to the Jews. For a Catholic it would be like Jesus showing up in Salt Lake City instead of Rome. These sophisticated men of stature were so ecstatic that they bowed in humility before a child and it changed them. I believe that is expressed symbolically in the text with, "They returned to their country by another route."

Have you ever gotten up in the morning and decided that your goal for the day is to seek God? Decided to sharpen all your senses to be on high alert to detect mystery? To search for awe? You will never find something unless you look for it. Like the magi, your search may require persistence in spite of not much happening. It may require the crossing of boundaries, going where you haven't been, being with those "other" folks.

It is easy to get in a rut. Ask God for this, thank God for that, read the Bible a bit, pray the same prayers, go to meeting, repeat. Do you ever wonder, "What is it all for? Why am I here? Is this it?" We will never experience God in a profound way if we are stuck in the status quo going through the motions. A comfortable status quo might be the greatest detriment to spiritual growth. What is your star? What gives your life direction? What are you giving gifts to?

So, we have the outsiders getting it and the insiders afraid of it. "All of Jerusalem was disturbed." What the heck? Shouldn't all of Jerusalem have been bonkers with joy and on a race to get to Bethlehem first? Tour caravans booked up. Donkey traffic jams. Hawkers on every corner. "Step right up. Get your replica star medallions. Touched by the messiah himself. But wait that's not all! For a limited time, we'll throw in a genuine, certified piece of straw from the original manger! Folks these things are selling like hot cakes so act now. Supplies are limited." Offer ends soon. May cause side effects. Certified authenticity questionable.

I can only conjecture, but I bet Jerusalem didn't want any rocking of the boat. Thanks, but no thanks, go away. Things are just fine and very comfortable. It is like being in a room on a sunny day. You pull the shades and the Light can't penetrate. The Light is always there, waiting on us. But it isn't easy to raise the shade. Who likes change?

Contrast the insider's reaction to the nobody's reaction, the shepherds.

Luke 2: 15-17 *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord*

has told us about." So, they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

We tend to have this romanticized image of the shepherd. The shepherds were:

Ritually Impure:

Constant contact with sheep, their manure, and blood made them unable to keep the strict ceremonial laws of the Pharisees, making them "unclean" for worship.

Social Outcasts:

Their profession was seen as dirty, smelly, and lonely, leading to stereotypes and exclusion from respectable society.

Legally Unreliable:

They were deemed untrustworthy witnesses in court, with some sources even saying it was forbidden to buy goods from them due to assumptions of theft.

Over and over again the marginalized, outcasts, powerless ones see and find the Light and we in our comfortable positions don't. Why? Why? Do we fear that if we let the Light in, It will ask us to change, will ask us to go home by another route?

Then there is Herod. He was despotic, brutal, and violent. He executed members of his own family. He squelched protests and had opponents removed by force. Let us not forget the rest of the story.

Matthew 2: 16-18 *Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:*

*¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah,
Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
Refusing to be comforted,
Because they are no more."*

Save the Children reported in September 2025 that over 20,000 children had been killed in Gaza in nearly two years of war. An average of 28 a day. 28 a day. They are horrendous deaths:

body parts blown off, crushed under collapsed buildings, burned, slowly starved. Rachel is still weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

What follows I reference not as a political issue but as a moral issue. I have often wondered. What if you put Netanyahu, all of his war cabinet, Biden, Trump, representatives from both parties and the arms dealers profiting from the sale of weapons in a stadium. You march out a 5-year-old with an explosive weapon tied to the child's arm. It is detonated and the child's arm is blown off. A doctor enters and tries to repair the damage using no anesthetic. Next a child is brought out and tied to a stake in the ground next to a large heavy stone pillar. The pillar is toppled and it crushes the child. Another child is brought out and soaked in gasoline. It is ignited. Finally, a skeletal, swollen belly 2-year-old is brought out. Too weak to cry the child is watched as it takes its last breath and dies. Would it make a difference? If it was filmed and shown to everyone in the US, would it make a difference? I don't think so. Some of the powerful people in the stadium would be posting stuff like, "Save the Children is controlled by Hamas. Only a few Palestinian children were killed, and they were killed by Hamas" and on and on with lie after lie. "Fake news." Others would say, "Well there will always be collateral damage."

God have mercy on us.

Every now and then I am struck with a profound sense of sadness. When it is raining hard, I picture God weeping uncontrollably. I look at the river and imagine it is all of God's tears gathered up, flowing by.

For me the antidote for the sadness is to look for awe.

Our yard is about 100 feet from the river and yesterday through the sliding glass door I watched 8 Canadian Geese on the lawn 20 feet from me. I see them all the time and pay little attention but this time I was struck by their beauty. The jet-black head and neck, flowing lines contrasted by white cheek patches and a gray body. They did not evolve to be land animals and yet as I watched their deliberate, measured, purposeful, waddling steps I saw captivating gracefulness.

They were feeding on the grass and seeds. There is always one goose that doesn't feed but with its head high stands guard. They will take turns standing guard. I watched the changing of the guard and am mystified as how it was communicated. You might not know the following: The geese fly in a "V" formation because it has been learned that as each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds at least 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own. When a goose falls out of formation, she suddenly feels the draft and resistance of trying to go it alone and quickly gets into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front. When the lead goose gets tired, she rotates back in the v and another goose flies

point. The geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. Finally, and most amazing of all, when a goose gets sick, or is wounded and falls out, two geese fall out of formation and follow her until she is either able to fly or until she is dead, then they launch out on their own or with another formation to catch up with the group.

Watching the geese filled me with joy and awe. The sadness is still with me, but the sharp edges were softened a bit.

Thank you.