

God With Us – 5: Epiphany
Matthew 2:1-12
January 1, 2022
Pastor: Bethany Nelson

How many of you are still enjoying your Christmas decorations? How many of you have already packed them all up, ready for another year? And how many never got them out to begin with? We're closing that strange week between Christmas and New Years, when time seems to move at its own unique pace. But today, we're marking the official end of the Christmas season with the celebration of Epiphany. But before we let go of this season... picture your nativity scene. It likely includes the Holy Family, an angel and shepherd, maybe a sheep, or two.... All reminding us of that first night, so long ago, when Mary birthed the Son of God and *pondered all these things in her heart*. But tell me... are the Wise Men present? When we introduce the Wise Men, we are blending the Gospel narratives of Luke and Matthew to complete our image of Jesus' birth. While the Wise Men, or Magi, are not included in Luke's story - they are present in Matthew's. However, as you heard, some time had passed in their travels and they found the Holy Family at their home, rather than in Bethlehem. If the story of Christmas is the story of God being "with us" and proclaiming "good news of great joy for all people!" ... then this story of the Magi is an important part of God reaching beyond the neighboring fields around Bethlehem, beyond the Jewish families, and into "the East" to the Gentiles, the travelers, and those around the world. God, in Christ, is "with us" — truly — for all people. I heard a Bishop remind us, "God reaches beyond shepherds at the bottom of the barrel to Wise Ones at the top. God reaches beyond people scared by God's glory to those who observe the glorious star at its rising, and methodically, persistently, and sincerely follow it to a king. All along the way, God directs them."

On this day of Epiphany, we close the Christmas season. The arrival of the Magi commemorates that the birth of Jesus has moved beyond the Bethlehem hills and into the world. Now, the good news of Christ is for all people. So what can these Magi, or Wise Men, teach us about discovering and following Jesus today? First... let's meet our cast of characters. Matthew's Gospel opens by telling us that Jesus was born in the territory and rule of King Herod, who ruled under the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. For the first hearers of Matthew's Gospel, a shudder would pass throughout the room at the utterance of Herod's name. This Herod (*which is not the same Herod who rules at Jesus' death*), is known to be brutally cruel. The first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, painted a picture of Herod as suspicious and cruel king. He was so concerned with protecting his crown, that he killed anyone he saw as a threat - including one of his wives and several children. It was said of him, that "it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than children." Because Herod, keeping kosher, did not eat pork. We see glimpses of Herod's cruelty at work in Matthew's gospel. He attempts to trick the Magi to reveal the location of Jesus, stating that he wishes to worship him - when all around know his evil intent. And, in response to the news of Jesus birth, he orders all infant boys under 2 be put to death. He is merciless and afraid. His actions, not only brought forth the death of many, but also forced many others to flee their homelands as refugees, seeking safety. Like millions of families still today, Mary and Joseph faced the terrifying decision to leave their home, to walk for hundreds of miles in search of safety, relying only on the kindness of others to protect them from the dangers behind them. If we continued reading Matthew's Gospel, you'd hear the story of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt, seeking refuge. An acute reminder to all of us today, that as we hear and see stories of people fleeing their homelands - risking their lives, future and security, to seek safety — that our God, who took on flesh in Jesus - was a refugee and migrant, too. And if we look into their eyes, in their cries, and dreams - we can see still the face and image of God. And it was this image, the tender face of God, present in a young child,

that the Magi sought. Our pageants and songs give us images of three kings, men from foreign countries, wearing royal garb and crowns, riding camels.

But Matthew doesn't tell us their number, names, or origin. And they actually are not really kings or visiting royalty. Instead, they are Magi and Zoroastrian Priests who make their living studying stars and planets and interpreting them to understand the will of the Divine. These Magi, a group small or large in number, who found Jesus and delivered three gifts — followed one of the oldest religions in the world, called Zoroastrianism. Though small now, it is still active today. They believe and read the stars to await the divine's guidance. Just like the Shepherds in the fields, these Magi from another land and another faith, found themselves encountering God through a shining light in a dark sky. These wise ones, from another faith and location remind me, that if we ever get stuck, thinking that we have to do a certain thing, or be a certain way, for God to work in our lives... If ever we start to think that we don't know enough to interpret or see God's guidance... that even the Magi couldn't avert their eyes from the presence of God in their skies. God reached out and used what they already knew, to make known God's presence among them. God spoke their language, keyed into their gifts and curiosities, and made Godself known. God didn't wait for the Magi to stumble upon the manger or wait to hear Jesus preach in decades to come. God didn't use a priest, like Zechariah, or prophet like Isaiah, to reveal God's promised presence to them... Instead, God used the stars in the sky, the light shining in the darkness, to reveal and proclaim to them, that God is here. Because friends, God so desires for you to know and see Jesus among you, that God will use what you already know, what you already have, to help you see Christ in your midst. Just as God came to us through a tender babe, born to an ordinary couple from a small town, visited by wandering shepherds... now God comes to unsuspecting Magi, as a star in the night sky. Interpreting the stars, the Magi found Herod to seek guidance. Because, surely, the King would know of this news. Herod put a furious plan in motion to use these astrologers for his own plans and sent them out to find the Holy Family. God placed the star in the sky, speaking the language of the Magi. But their own curiosity, trust, and faithfulness gave them courage to follow the star to see where it might lead. Without knowing this God, God's intent or promises, the Magi followed... In time, they met Jesus, God in flesh. But they didn't meet Jesus in Bethlehem. From their initial sighting of the star to their arrival in Bethlehem after a stop in Jerusalem, considerable time would have elapsed. We read in verse 11, "They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him." This is the moment of Epiphany. The moment, when the Magi knelt before Christ and we see that God is here. Not just for the people of Bethlehem and Judea, but for Jews and Gentiles. For the people of Samaria and Persia, and the ends of the earth. God has sent God's son to be a savior for *all* people. Epiphany is about expanding our understanding of how God is at work and revealed in the world.

And here, is another reminder that God is at work in unexpected ways and through unexpected people. We're reading from the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, but he's already giving clues as to where we're headed: We've begun with our Wisemen, these Magi from the East -- courageous outsiders who followed and worshipped Christ. And we will end with a command from Jesus, sending us all out to do the same: "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations. Baptizing them in the name of the Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit." From the beginning to the end, Matthew tells us, that God is here, for all people. God has a big vision at work, desiring that Christ be known, not only by those nearby or a select few, but by all the world. Those who are far away, those who are unexpected and unprepared. The story of Christ's birth is a story of God with us. And the story of Jesus' life and resurrection is a story of God *for* us, and for all people. By the shining of a star, God led these unsuspecting Magi to witness the birth of the very One who will one day send us all out, not by the guiding of a star -- but by the guiding of our hearts: to share the good news of God's love with an unsuspecting world.

But it all begins with a question. One we are all confronted with as we read this story... How do you respond when you encounter Emmanuel, the Messiah, among us? Will it be, as Herod, who responds with fear and selfishness? Even cruelty. Or might you respond as the Magi, who respond with curiosity and courage. Who, upon meeting the Christ child, are changed, their compass reset and lives transformed. There are Herod's yet today, people who hover in shadows and cling tightly, with fear to their own power. Those who are afraid to embrace God's hope, and be transformed by love. But there are Magi among us, too. People who bravely change their course, to follow the guiding star. Those who let God hold their fears, and give them courage, to live anew. To seek a new world, a new life, where love is born among us.

As we gather today on the first day of this New Year, perhaps this is a question that can inform our resolutions or goals for 2023. How might our hearts be transformed, if we set our focus on following God's star as the Magi? How might our community and world be uplifted if we follow Jesus with curiosity and courage? What might our lives and world look like, if we all begin and ground our year in Christ? For the last few years, I've made it a practice to choose a word for the year. It's a not a goal or resolution. But these words, my *star word*, are a lens to help me focus, guide me to grow, to set aside my own worries, and pay attention to God's presence. The first year I did this was in 2019, and I chose the word **SURRENDER**. Mostly, because *surrendering* seemed like a thing I very much did *not* want to do. And maybe, instead of fighting God, I could follow. This happened to be either the very best or worst word for that year. This was the year I was pregnant with our third son, that same son who was a full two weeks overdue. It was the same year when we were being reappointed and ended up moving. Basically - it was a year when all kinds of things were out of my control. But God worked through this word, helping me embrace "surrender" as a posture of faith. And rather than try to plan or work harder to navigate that season, I surrendered to God, and discovered I was already being held securely. Then, in 2020, I opted for the word **PAUSE**. Hoping to make it a year of noticing God in my life and relationships and taking time to be really present to those around me. As the pandemic came, and we spent our days at home... I told God that wasn't what I had in mind for a pause. And this year, as we deepen our roots and settle into our life here, as my kids grow... My guiding word will be **CULTIVATE**. I pray that God will reveal opportunities for me to strengthen relationships, to cultivate them new and old, and to discover how God might cultivate something new in me. Because this is a practice that has been life giving for me, I encourage you to consider it. And if you do, I'd love to hear what word you choose.

But even if you don't... As we begin this new year, I pray you enter it with the curiosity, courage, and humility of the Magi. That as you notice the presence God in the skies, the stars, and in your life, that you allow it to work within you and guide you towards transformation. As Pastor Tami wrote in her Friday email, John Wesley invited Methodists to pray a covenant prayer at the start of each year, as a way of renewing our baptismal covenant and surrendering ourselves to God's guidance. With hearts of curiosity and courage, I invite you to pray Wesley's Covenant Prayer with me now, using contemporary language:

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,

Praised for you or criticized for you.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.

**And now, O wonderful and holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, you are mine, and I am yours.
So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, Let it also be made in heaven.
Amen.**

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 1, 2022

Weekly Prayer

"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 by 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." -- John Wesley Covenant Prayer

Monday, January 2

Scripture: Luke 9:23

Jesus said to everyone, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me.

Observation

John Wesley adapted his Covenant Prayer from the Puritan tradition and expected Methodists to pray this prayer at the beginning of each new year as a way of remembering their baptism. It asks that we remain open to God's presence and guidance and puts us in a position of listening to God. It is a practical description of what Jesus was talking about when he said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

Application

How might God speak to you this week through the covenant prayer? Make space every day to pray this prayer of renewal.

Prayer

"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 by 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." -- John Wesley Covenant Prayer

Tuesday, January 3

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him." When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote: *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel.*" Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

Observation

Throughout the Christmas story, we're introduced to an unexpected "cast of characters." In the presence of the Magi, or Wise Men, we meet people from another faith tradition and another land, whom God worked through. These wise men had an "epiphany," or sudden insight, as they recognized themselves in the presence of God, kneeling to worship the baby Jesus.

Application

How many of us "know" the plans we have for our day or life? What happens when God interrupts those plans? In the story of the Magi, we see a people who trusted the way God was at work in the stars and in their dreams. How are we listening to God, even in unexpected places and people?

Prayer

Almighty God, shine your light upon us and illumine our path as we follow you. Give us signs of your love and presence today and always, Amen.

Wednesday, January 4

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-15

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: *I have called my son out of Egypt.*

Observation

Herod does not take kindly to the news of a new king and sets out to protect his throne. The Holy Family finds themselves as refugees; seeking safety in a new land, they cross and escape to Egypt. Here, they create and build a new home and community, as Mary and Joseph await God's signal to return home.

Application

There are 100 million people displaced from their homes around the world. Like the Holy Family, these are parents and children, seeking safety to live and create community. They, like Mary and Joseph, rely on the kindness of strangers to protect, heal, and love them. Spend time today in prayer, asking God for peace in our world and hearts. You might also learn more about the ways the UMC is working with global migrants and refugees: <https://umcmmission.org/learn-about-us/global-migration/>

Prayer

Holy God, you are the creator and parent of us all. Protect your children around the world. Bring an end to war and violence, that all may have a safe place to grow and live. Make us a people who create safe spaces for others, who see you in the eyes of all we meet. Amen.

Thursday, January 5

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11-14

I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. I will be present for you, declares the LORD, and I will end your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile, declares the LORD.

Observation

Jeremiah wrote to a people that were in exile, and reminded them that God had not forgotten them. Even amidst scary and difficult situations, God's plans for their lives would remain steadfast. God's plans are always for good.

Application

When my boys were babies, I made it a habit to pray during our middle of the night feedings. It was a quiet time with God, my babe, and my own thoughts. This passage was one I returned to again, and again, asking God's protection and guidance over my family. Verse 11 is often recited, but I have found such comfort in verse 14, "I will let you find me, says the Lord." And what a gift that our God is not hidden in secret, but promises to reveal themselves to us, when we seek God "with all our heart." As this new year begins, how are you seeking after God?

Prayer

Lord, bring wisdom and guidance to my life. Help me not only to seek you, but to see you in the world around me.

Friday, January 6

Scripture: Luke 4:16-21

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the

prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

Observation

In this passage from Luke, we read the first recorded sermon by Jesus. He referenced the words of Isaiah, using them as a framework for his own ministry, beginning his sermon by declaring: "Today this scripture is fulfilled." As we've learned this season, Jesus is Emmanuel: God with us. And in Christ, we see God at work among us, bringing life to the words of Isaiah.

Application

The feast of Epiphany, which is January 6th, brings the Christmas season to an end. To mark the day and focus our attention as we turn ahead, I'll share a poem by Howard Thurman, inspired by the Christmas story and first sermon of Jesus. Thurman was an African-American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. You can learn more about him here: <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2020/who-was-howard-thurman/>

"The Work of Christmas"

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

Prayer

Almighty God, make music in my heart this day. Tune my life to your grace, that my words and actions embody your goodness. Make me to follow you each day, that the "work of Christmas" be made alive in and through me. Amen.

Saturday, January 7

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are

trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring.

Observation

This passage from Revelation tells us of a new heaven and earth, where God has made their home with us. It is a passage of hope and promise, from our God who both creates and restores all of creation.

Application

We value the fresh start each New Year brings. But even as we celebrate the New Year, we know that not everything is as it should be. Some of us may have already let go of any resolutions for the year! But God promises to bring new life to us all, and forgiveness fresh each day. How might God be “making all things new” within your life and heart today?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I thank you for the gift of life, for the chance to start this year as your child. And I thank you for the assurance you offer me of an eternity with you, and the promise that you will be with us always. Amen.