

A Sermon for DaySpring on Epiphany Sunday

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Learning to See

Matthew 2:1-12

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Years ago, I was in Mexico during the first week of the new year. One afternoon, I was walking through shops, looking for a gift to bring back home. I heard a commotion happening outside the shop, but I didn't pay attention to it. However, a flurry of activity began to swell around me. People were walking fast and heading outside; a noise was growing. I peered out the window of the little tiendita and saw a crowd forming outside in the street. I tried to see more but all I could see were the backs of heads.

I kept looking for a window. I looked from one window and then to another to catch a glimpse I found a doorway that led me through another tiendita and then outside. I slipped onto the street, gently navigating the crowd but I still couldn't see. I thought of how Zacchaeus couldn't see and climbed a tree. But there were no trees to climb.

I heard something coming down the street and I finally began to see what everyone was waiting for. Down the road, came a parade of excitement surrounding 3 people dressed as magi on stilts. Their towering figures floated down the street, each carrying gifts while children darted back and forth trying to catch a glimpse of this spectacle. It was my first, and only experience of 3 Kings Day or *Tres Reyes*, which is how Latin America and much of Europe celebrate Epiphany.

Have you ever felt like you just cannot see what is going on? You bend your ear, search for a window, try a different vantage point and find that you cannot get a glimpse of what is happening. You can't get the full picture. You don't think you're lost, but you can't see clearly. It's like swimming in a murky pond or lake when doesn't do any good to open your eyes underwater. If you have ever played Marco Polo, you know what it's like to search and not see. Most of us don't like *not being able to see*.

But I'm not really talking about physical sight, I am talking about seeing of a different sort. Like the blind seer in the *Odyssey*, one can be blind and still see. The hymn writer talks about spiritual sight: "I once was lost, but now I'm found. I was blind, but now I see." When I think of that, I am reminded of the Gospel of mark and blind Bartimaeus, who *SAW* that Jesus was the son of God before Christ restored his *sight*. All the while the disciples, who could physically see, seemed to be spiritually blind to what Jesus was doing.

What is it that helps us to see? I doubt the magi were the only ones who noticed that shining star in the sky, *but* they were the only ones who followed. How do we notice what God is doing around us?

The magi were seekers, always looking for signs and wonders, observing the skies for all that is significant. They were open to God, even though they may have been unfamiliar with the God

of scripture. They were open. With these scientist-travelers, we see what God can do with an open and humble heart. On their journey, they looked to the light of the star trusting that it would lead to something important.

Don't we all wish it would be easy to see and know God's guidance? Like the writing on the wall in the book of Daniel, or . . . like following bright star? The magi simply saw the star . . . and followed. That was that. But was it really that simple?

It is easy to romanticize following the star. Can you imagine traveling to a new land while watching the night sky for guidance? I can hear the questions . . . Are we going in the right direction? Are you seeing what I am seeing? Have we gotten off course? Can this really be? What are we doing? Are we crazy?

Oddly enough, these are some of the same questions we found ourselves asking in the early days of considering opening a hospitality house for asylum seekers. A couple of clusters of church members were meeting and praying to this possibility and to God's work in and around us. We were opening our heart to it, and we all asked these very questions. However, by opening our hearts to God in this way, we began to see how God might be guiding and leading us. We didn't have a star to guide us.

Sometimes following God's nudgings can feel daunting. Discerning God's leading can sometimes resemble walking in a foggy meadow. Discernment is trying to discern or understand God's guidance and direction. The practice and discipline of spiritual direction is instructive during these seasons of discerning that we all go through. In spiritual direction, we seek God together, listening and opening our hearts to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It can be hard work and that's why we do it together. For the magi, it resulted in joy as they experienced the light of God working in their hearts. They had a front-row seat to God's inbreaking light.

The magi studied the stars and looked for discoveries as scientists do. They opened their hearts to God and followed what they saw. Many questions in this passage. How many of them were there? We don't know! Was this star – was it a comet? A planetary alignment? Was it constant or did it disappear? All good questions. We do know, that on their journey to a new land, the magi stopped by **King Herod's, palace rest stop** for directions. This is proof there had to have been a woman in the group of magi!

At the palace, Herod called in the chief priests and teachers for advice, but they could not see. When King Herod heard that foreigners came to worship a new King, he was full of fear and all of Jerusalem feared along with him. Maybe they were afraid of what would happen when Herod's throne was challenged. Fearful of war and the casualties left in its wake. Maybe they were afraid of what they didn't know or couldn't understand.

Is it possible that their fear blinded them? Is it possible that their fear kept them from meeting the Christ-light? Fear can prevent us from truly seeing, It can prevent us from following the

nudging of the Holy Spirit. Fear is often at the center of so many destructive emotions and actions. Sometimes when we are so close to something, so steeped in it, we cannot really see. For whatever reason, the religious insiders cannot see the forest for the trees.

However, the Magi, the outsiders can see, and they followed and met God. When the Magi found the Christ child, it was as if they were filled with light. Their first reaction was overwhelming joy and worship. Worship or adoration is an important theme woven three times into this passage. In adoration, the magi offered their gifts to the Holy Family. Little did they know, that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus would soon flee in the night for their safety. Maybe these gifts may have become provisions for this family and their journey of exile into Egypt.

Because of their open hearts, these humble travelers encountered the living God, the light of the world. I imagine the light of Christ and the heavenly star were in an endless exchange of light. And the magi, seeing that, were struck with awe and wonder, God then led them home in another direction. Their trajectory changed.

This is what Christ's light and love do – it changes and remakes. How often does our trajectory change after we have followed God's leading and encountered his light and love? We change majors, change jobs, extend ourselves in hospitality in stretching ways, give sacrificially, invest in relationships, let go of things, give away things, serve the suffering. Our lives often look different because of the work of Christ's light and love in us.

During the season of Epiphany, we celebrate the wonder of this very transformation. For God revealed Godself to humanity so that we all might receive and be made new by the light of Christ.

You've probably heard the phrase "the light shines brightest in the darkness," and while that may be true, when you are sitting in the darkness, it may be difficult to see the light. It can feel like you're searching to see what everyone else can see, but you can only see the backs of heads. When the light is obscured or you cannot see, we look to each other to see what the other sees. I can imagine the magi did this for each other on their journey. I'll look for the light for you, and you look for the light for me.

Isaiah prophesied that thick darkness covered the people, and the glory and light of God rose above it. In the darkness, God shines light. What does it say that God chose to come as a vulnerable baby when a maniacal tyrant king was on the throne? God chose to share the light of Christ in *that* very darkness.

Why? For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in him, may have life, lasting and whole. God came to show us how to live with light, even in the darkness. This is the joy of Epiphany. *Epiphany* comes from the Greek word, *epiphaneia* meaning the appearance of or manifestation of God.

The Apostle Paul, a religious insider had his own little epiphany experience on the road to Damascus. Spiritually blind, with a closed heart, he was literally blinded for 3 days by the light of Christ. And he, too, was never the same

Paul in Ephesians describes what was revealed to him through Christ's light: **the light of Christ is for all people** – for insiders and outsiders, for those who can see and those who cannot. The Gospel of Matthew also begins and ends with this reality. Matthew begins with the magi coming from the corners of the earth, and it ends with the Great Commission.

Paul also commissions the church in Ephesians 3, to share the Christ-light with the world so that “through the Church, all may know boundless the riches of Christ.” Today we bless our homes and sanctuary and our church grounds so that all who enter may see the love and light of Christ – so they may know the boundless riches of Christ.

When we are honest, each of us is on our own epiphany quest, too. We long for the intrusion of Christ's light in a way that changes us. Worship, humility, and open hearts all seem to go hand in hand *with God's light breaking in* and doing something new. Paul and the magi walked a new path after seeing God in this way. *We see the light of God, it changes us, and it shines through us.*

It is not hard to find darkness in the world, there is no shortage of pain, deception, and false hopes around us. Recently, I heard Dr. Cornell West say “so many of the spiritual greats are no longer with us. Our young people, the next generation, need to see spiritual and moral greatness.”

Our task as the people of God is to do just that - to be the shining body of Christ. We who behold the Christ-light, share it. And as we go, we leave fragments of Christ's light scattered behind us on our way.

Will you pray with me?

O God, we open our hearts to you today. We humbly bow before you today and praise you for you are light and your love extends to all peoples. May you fill us with your love and shine the light of Christ on us. Help us to see you, Lord. Break through into our crowded world and hearts, heal us and change us so that we may be your people who share your light on the way. Amen