

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Epiphany of Our Lord • January 5, 2020**

**Isaiah 60:1-6 • Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 • Ephesians 3:1-12 • Matthew 2:1-12**

Today we are celebrating feast of the Epiphany and bringing our Christmas season to a close. Approximately twelve days ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus. And today we celebrate the arrival of the magi. This arrival often feels like something of an afterthought. Maybe you slept in last Sunday (good choice, no judgement), and now you show up at church again and think, *Oh, yea. I guess it's technically still Christmas.* But the story of the arrival of the magi is no less significant than the arrival of Jesus twelve days ago. In fact, it takes that story and puts it in a new light.

To understand why, consider the word “epiphany.” When you have an epiphany, it is not just because you learned a new fact. It’s because you’ve made a connection between seemingly discrete pieces of information. An epiphany is a realization, a moment of recognition, a flash of illumination where some new piece of knowledge changes how we see the world. The world makes more sense, feels more coherent, presents itself more openly and transparently than it did before.

For example, when you get to the ending of a mystery or a who-dun-it and you find out who the culprit is, the first thing you want to do is go back and re-read it to make sure it all fits together. Part of what makes a good mystery good is that it’s exciting even when you know the ending because you notice how different elements connect, and you see things you didn’t see before. It’s an epiphany. But if you got to the end of the book and the culprit was a character who has heretofore been unmentioned in the book, you wouldn’t say, “What an epiphany.” You’d say, “That’s a really dumb ending.” Because it’s not connecting things in any meaningful way.

So what’s the epiphany in the Epiphany story? Well, think about how Matthew begins his gospel. At first glance, Matthew has the worst beginning of any gospel. John has the Word became flesh. Luke has the dedication to Theophilus, lover of God. Mark has the startling arrival of Jesus by the Jordan. Matthew begins his gospel with that three-hundred-word genealogy of Jesus’ ancestors. But if you know what to look for, it’s supremely interesting.

That genealogy begins, “The genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” “Son of David” and “Son of Abraham” are Matthew’s flashing lights, can’t-miss-it way of saying that Jesus is Jewish. And the identification of Jesus as the messiah is a Jewish image, too. The messiah was whoever would defeat the Roman Empire and restore Israel to its rightful place as a triumphant nation. The messiah didn’t have to be divine, but they did have to be Jewish.

So Matthew’s Christmas story begins as a sort of in-house Jewish drama. Joseph and Mary are Jewish. Their son is Jewish. The title he will have is a Jewish one. If you’re not Jewish, it seems like this whole thing is really none of your concern.

Until the magi show up. The magi come from the east and are, by any reasonable reader’s interpretation, not Jewish. They are probably astronomer-types from somewhere in modern day Iran. But God invites them to come see this new messiah. So they trek off to see this new Jewish messiah even though they’re not Jewish, and they probably have no context for what a messiah is. These travelers represent the rest of the world. This is one reason why if you look at many creche scenes, even the ones with a lilywhite Jesus that looks like he was painted by Archie Bunker, at least one of the magi is often depicted as black. Because in the imagination of the early church, the magi represented Europe, Asia, and Africa. In their imagination, the whole world.

So who is having the epiphany moment in this story? Well, the magi are having some kind of moment. But it’s really Mary and Joseph who are having this epiphany. And as people reading Matthew’s gospel, it’s our epiphany, too. Remember, Mary and Joseph didn’t invite the magi. The magi have been invited by God. And so when the magi, these Gentiles arrive, that’s when Mary and Joseph and all of us

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have an epiphany. That this child, this family, this story that the thought was for this particular group of people are actually of universal significance. It's a bigger, more diverse, richer story than they thought it was. It doesn't erase anything that's already true. God's revelation to the Gentiles doesn't make Jesus less Jewish, but it does expand who we think the story is for.

But scripture is full of other epiphanies, too. We heard one of those from Isaiah today as well. Third Isaiah was written after many of the Israelites returned after exile in Babylon. Jerusalem is in ruins, living conditions are extremely poor, and the social fabric is rent. Because some people come back from exile and say, "We went through this terrible experience. So we are the ones who really get what it means to be a part of this community." And other people say, "Well, we never left the land. We were born here. So we're the ones who are the center of this community." But Isaiah says something else. The glory of the Lord isn't just for the returned exiles. And it isn't just for the people who never left. "The glory of the LORD has risen upon you... [and] nations shall come to your light." Who is the glory of God for? It's for everybody. You're thinking too small. You're arguing over who is the center of this community, when the real center of the community is the glory of God.

And we still have those epiphany moments today, too. One of the things that makes doing ministry fun are those moments when people, including me, connect things in new ways and realize that God's story is bigger than we thought it was. After we visited Elzahra Islamic Center last spring, someone mentioned to me that they were nervous because most of the things they heard about Muslims on the news were negative. But then they were invited into their house of worship, and they realized that we're actually not so different. That's an epiphany moment.

When Mimi Confer visited Advent last fall, part of her presentation was about how churches are perceived in their communities. And she said that we often focus so strongly on the needs of the people in our pews that we miss addressing the needs of people who aren't in our pews. So when you make decisions you can't just poll the people on church on a Sunday, you have leave the church grounds and talk to your neighbors and community members. And someone came up to me afterwards and said, "When Mimi said that, I thought *Of course that's true*. But for some reason that had never occurred to me before." That's an epiphany moment, too.

My favorite epiphany moment someone had this year was from watching Disney+. There's some show where they take kids with special talents or abilities and make them into Marvel superheroes. And one of our members was watching one about a middle school girl who does a lot of activism for LGBTQ youth around things like bullying. And at the beginning of the show, the girl's family said they lived in New Jersey. And the person thought *Well, that's funny. I live in New Jersey, too*. And then they mentioned that the girl was very involved in her church. And the person thought *Well, that's funny. I go to a church in New Jersey, too*. And then they showed the outside of the church. And the church sign said, Holy Counselor Lutheran Church, ELCA. And the person thought, *Oh. They're us*. And *Oh. They're us* is probably the most profound epiphany moment of all.

Those epiphany moments remind us that God's story is bigger than our story. They connect things in a way that that feels novel and unexpected. But that doesn't mean they're easy. Because epiphanies usually mean we had something wrong. We're glad that they happened, but they can also be humbling. They make us wonder what we were doing before. *I'm glad I know I have a lot in common with my Muslim neighbors. But now I'm wondering why I thought I didn't*. Or *It's good to be reminded that we're called to serve the people who are "outside" the church just as thoughtfully as the people "inside."* But when have we put the needs of our members over the needs of our community?

But there's some grace in realizing that we were wrong, too. These epiphanies have a way of re-centering us. They remind us that it is always God who comes to us before we come to God. Which means that we don't always get a say in who shows up when God arrives. Mary and Joseph probably thought that this new child called the messiah was mostly relevant for Jews like them. Until a bunch of astronomers

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showed up uninvited. Those factions in Israel arguing over who the glory of God was for certainly didn't think it was for the nations. But according to Isaiah, that's who the glory of God shines on. Whenever we think we have a system figured out to explain everything and everyone, God cracks the world open once again.

Arise and shine, Isaiah proclaims. For your light, God's light, has come.

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