

## I. Advanced organizer

### A. It was probably around 2005 when I had a unique experience

1. I had been working as a musician, and working a day job running non-profit program, but drawn to service and leadership in church. Still, whenever encouraged to consider ministry as a vocation, I responded that I was called to “the world, not the church”.
2. Then one day I got sick. Really sick. Turned out to be bad pneumonia. Doctors prescribed six weeks of bed rest. Cancel my day job, my gigs, my ministry involvements, etc.
  - a) Read War and Peace.
  - b) Then was chatting with God a lot.
  - c) “Why do I miss ministry?”...”That’s what you were made for.” “I thought I was for the world, not the church.”
3. Why does it have to be one or the other? Making false choice.
4. “I want people who will take the church into the world.”
5. This for me was a moment of clarity that changed my life. It set me on the path I’ve been on for years now. The path that brought me to what I’m doing here with all of you. It’s what many would call an Epiphany.

### B. What does “Epiphany” mean?

1. comes from the Greek, ἐπιφάνεια, *epiphaneia*, meaning “**manifestation**” or “**appearance**”
2. Long before it took on it’s current meaning, “epiphany” was understood to be an appearance or manifestation of divinity.
3. Eventually that would evolve to be what we often think of today - Meriam-Webster definition:
  - a) ***a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something (2) : an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking (3) : an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure***
4. Rooted in a tradition in the church celebrated this time of year when the church has recognized **the importance of the epiphany of Jesus - the appearance of divinity in him**. Traditionally there have been two main stories that the church has reflected on surrounding Epiphany, with whole traditions, games, services, foods, and so on that much of America Protestantism has forgotten.

### C. This time of year, we often think about New Year.

1. Make resolutions, set goals, etc.
2. **Opportunity to mark time. To recognize what has past, and what is coming.**
3. As I’ve been praying about the season we are in as a community, the word that comes to mind for the year that’s begun is “**re-form**”. An opportunity to **build on what has been but also recognize that there is a new-ness to it as well**.
  - a) We are forming again in a new way. I think this is true in multiple ways.
    - (1) **Re-forming as a Haven community**. Many of the core original founders have moved on. But God has brought others and they are an essential part of building what we will be going forward.
    - (2) But there is also a **re-forming going on more broadly**. A re-forming of our own senses of identity in what it means to be a citizen and a person of faith.
    - (3) **Re-forming in the broader church**, what it means to be a church that stands for the margins and is not always allied with the empire
    - (4) **Re-forming in civic engagement**

4. But the catalyzing events that will inform these **re-form moments are epiphanies**. We need to experience manifestation, to be affected by it, and have something to re-group around.
5. So as we kick off a season considering how God might be calling us as a community to re-form and us as individuals to re-form, I thought we'd take a couple of weeks to start the conversation by joining some of our brothers and sisters from other Church traditions in the celebration of Epiphany. This week we'll look at the story the Western church considers. Next week, the one the Eastern church focuses on.
6. **Advent was about coming**; recognizing with longing what we are looking toward. **Epiphany is about recognizing what has appeared and been manifest in our presence**. We hold both as we are formed into what God has for us in this moment.

II. Traditional Epiphany Story in Western Church Tradition: **The Story of the Magi**

- A. In much of the Christian World, Epiphany wraps up a **twelve day celebration of Christmas**. For some this included gifts on each day, as per song with "Partridge in a pear tree". At the end of the 12 days comes the Epiphany celebration. **Recognizing the arrival of Magi from the east**. This is not the story we get not from Luke's nativity account, that tells us of angels, shepherds, and a manger, but Matthew's account. It tells another side of Jesus' coming. So we're gonna look at that familiar story today, pulling it out of the Christmas pageant, and letting it stand on its own. As we do so, I invite you to consider the moments of Epiphany - or manifestation and appearance and revelation - that you find provocative.

B. Matthew 2: 1-12

***After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, in the time of King Herod, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem 2 saying, "Where is the one who is born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 After assembling all the chief priests and experts in the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem of Judea," they said, "for it is written this way by the prophet:***

***6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are in no way least among the rulers of Judah,  
for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"***

***7 Then Herod privately summoned the wise men and determined from them when the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and look carefully for the child. When you find him, inform me so that I can go and worship him as well." 9 After listening to the king they left, and once again the star they saw when it rose led them until it stopped above the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star they shouted joyfully. 11 As they came into the house and saw the child with Mary his mother, they bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their treasure boxes and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 After being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back by another route to their own country.***

- C. **Familiar story. Plot points are known to most of us**. But have we taken much time to consider who the various characters are, and what their experience was. What did "epiphany" mean for each of them? Who saw it? Who missed it? And what does this story communicate about the bigger story Matthew was beginning with these verses? How might that affect our own experiences of our place in the bigger story.

D. A Meditation on the key characters.

1. **Herod.** The current political King of the Jews, reigning on behalf of the Roman Empire. Story starts with him receiving a delegation of foreigners, and he and all of Jerusalem are alarmed by them.
  - a) That's striking. Why is Jerusalem as a whole so alarmed?
  - b) Important to understand a bit about Herod the Great. Josephus, the great ancient historian from the period gave us more about him than we have about any historical figure of the era.
  - c) **Ridiculously cruel and violent man**, particularly prone to paranoia and violent responses to it in his later years. Killed four of his own sons because he feared they were after his throne. Killed his favorite wife (among ten) and her mother. He killed one of his chief priests by drowning him during a water polo game. And when Herod was dying of illness, he issued his to summon the head of every household to the stadium he had built and execute them all the moment he died, so that all of Israel would be mourning. He knew people wouldn't mourn his passing, but he couldn't stand the idea that they'd celebrate. (Thankfully the order was never carried out, but it tells you what kind of a guy he was.)
  - d) Given all that, the idea of a group of foreign people of power from a neighboring empire coming to inquire about new leadership would be certainly alarming, and likely secondarily to the political class around him.
  - e) They were right to be alarmed. Matthew goes on to tell us that when Herod realizes the Magi have tricked him, he reacts tyrannically.
    - (1) ***16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he became enraged. He sent men to kill all the children in Bethlehem and throughout the surrounding region from the age of two and under, according to the time he had learned from the wise men.***
2. **Chief Priests and Experts in the Law.**
  - a) These ones are particularly interesting. These are the religious leaders who represent the faith that Jesus is sent to be the fulfillment of. They believe in prophecies of the Messiah. They have studied them, and clearly Matthew sees them as having reached conclusions similar to the ones he is making, that the Messiah is to come from Bethlehem.
  - b) And yet, when the Magi inform them that they believe this prophesied anointed one has arrived, they don't seem to respond. They don't celebrate. They don't go check it out for themselves. They don't go to worship. Why?
  - c) Are they genuinely not really interested in the Messiah? Are they too scared of Herod to want anything to do with the Christ child? Clearly they have seen there's a price to pay being in alliance with anyone Herod finds threatening, as Herod drowned one of their own for suspected disloyalty.
  - d) Or perhaps they mistrust these foreigners. They don't possibly believe some foreign astrologers could actually have a beat on the coming of the Messiah when they do not. Surely, God would announce the coming directly to them, they may have thought, not sent some pagan weirdos from another land to show them to God's anointed.
  - e) Whatever the reason, their inaction ends up meaning that not only do they miss the Epiphany, the arrival of the pinnacle moment of everything they are supposed to be about, they also become complicit in the violent tragedy that follows, as Herod, in his paranoia, executes all boys 2 and under born in Bethlehem.

3. **The Magi.** (Translated “wise men” here.) The most mysterious. Who were they? What do we know about them? Were there three of them? Were they kings? Did they look like this (picture from Nativity set)?
  - a) **subject of intense speculation for thousands of years.** And we also have to acknowledge, a lot of holiday tradition that has developed apart from the actual Biblical account or any outside historical information.
  - b) For example - **early on tradition began to imagine there were three because there were three gifts.** By Middle Ages, various Christians had even named them and created physical descriptions (Balthazar, Gaspar, and Melchior). Some traditions say one was from Asia, one was from Africa, and one from Arabia. And while that’s a lovely inclusive picture, and certainly representative of where the story is going, including people from every tribe and tongue and nation in the work God is doing through Jesus, **it doesn’t reflect the story Matthew is actually telling.**
  - c) **Matthew never stipulates the number.** Contemporary scholars point out that it would be rare in those days to make such a journey, particularly with so many valuables without a large entourage, so likely, there were many more than 3. The Eastern Orthodox church has generally believed that there were 12.
  - d) **We can also rule out them being Kings.** There’s nothing in the text to indicate that. This tradition seems to be rooted in reading back prophetic words from the Old Testament like this:  
 (1) *“Arise! Shine! For your light arrives!  
 The splendor of the Lord shines on you!...  
 Nations come to your light,  
 kings to your bright light.”*
  - e) So they weren’t Kings. But the text also says nothing specifically about where in the East they have come, or who exactly they might be.
  - f) **The term given by Matthew for these visitors is the Greek word “magoi”, a plural of the singular Magus.** Some believe that this is in reference to a particular group of Zoroastrian priests that served in Persia that went by that term. However, other literature, including uses of the word in the Bible itself, show us that **this word was used much more broadly than this particular group**, and the heyday of the group as about 4-500 years prior to Jesus, so it’s not a fair assumption that they were part of it. Still, Persia is a reasonable guess as their origin.
  - g) Another reasonable guess with much attesting to it is that **they were from Arabia, specifically the kingdom of Sheba**, contemporary Yemen. During that time Sheba would have been a wealthy nation, with gold mines available, and it was also the one place in the world where the trees that produced **Frankincense and Myrrh were grown.**
  - h) Despite the fact that our Nativity sets show the magi alongside shepherds, they definitely would not have been in a stable with Jesus on the night he was born. **Whether they came from Persia or Sheba, they had a long journey to undertake.** Who knows the months of sorting out what they saw in the sky, making the preparations, and finally embarking on this epic trip? By the time they found him, **Jesus was likely a year or two old, which is why Herod killed all babies two and under in the area.**
  - i) So what *do* we know about who the Magi are? What really matters?

- (1) **We know they are some sort of astrologer magicians.** They were learned in science and spirituality in ways that were foreign to the story of God's people, and yet their unique journeys lead them to see the appearance of divinity in Jesus. And we know that this capacity to identify Jesus, to be drawn to him, to worship him for who he is, is unique.
  - (a) **Every other character that encounters Jesus at his birth has to be told by some sort of divine messenger about his coming.** Angel to Zechariah. Angel to Mary and Joseph. A leaping baby filled with the Holy Spirit for Elizabeth. A whole choir of angels for the shepherds. But these Magi, they somehow figure out something is going on themselves. Their own understanding of the stars, and perhaps their knowledge of the Hebrew stories of faith, lead them when they see some sort of phenomenon in the sky to believe something important is happening in Israel that has significance for them. And it's important enough that they undertake a long, dangerous, costly journey to see it with their own eyes and to participate in it.
  - (2) Their gifts demonstrate that they understand the unique character of Jesus' identity, perhaps more than anyone else.
    - (a) **Gold** - a sign of royalty. Recognize that Jesus is a king
    - (b) **Frankincense** - a sign of divinity. An incense burned in religious ceremonies. Recognize that Jesus is worthy of worship reserved for God.
    - (c) **Myrrh** - a sign of mortality. Myrrh was the spice used for embalming. The gift of it marks an understanding of Jesus' humanity, and certainly foreshadows his untimely death.
  - (3) David BG's Facebook Post: *"Happy Epiphany! The day Christians remember how several Middle Eastern magician-astrologers discerned the divine presence before anyone else."*

#### 4. **The Holy Family**

- a) Matthew doesn't tell us anything about Mary and Joseph's response, but I'd have to imagine that **of all the strange encounters they've had in recent years, this might have been the most mind blowing.** From the visits of angels, to shepherds sent by an angel, to prophets in the temple recognizing Jesus when he was dedicated at eight days old, and now a year or two later, a large delegation of foreigners arrives, kneels before their toddler with tales of the long journey they've undertaken to find this newborn king, and then **bring out treasures to present to the family.** I imagine they must have been overcome afresh with the wonder of all of it. They're just going about their routine as parents with a young child living in Bethlehem, when this delegation shows up at the door of their little house. The gifts they give are abundant, and as it happens, they miraculously supply them with wealth to provide for them and their infant as they had to then undertake the journey to Egypt to protect their infant son.

E. **So the Epiphany story features these four sets of characters:** Herod, the religious elites who worked with him, the Magi, and Jesus' family. Each of them experiences Epiphany in a different way.

1. **Herod perceives it as a threat** - bad news, not good news that must be eliminated.
2. **The Religious elites miss it** they can't perceive what's happening right under their noses, though this was supposedly the story they cared about.

3. **The Magi receive the manifestation.** They perceive it first. They see something in the stars and their perception leads them on a journey to find out more; to “come and see” the epiphany for themselves.
  4. **And for Mary and Joseph, they too receive a deeper revelation.** The Epiphany has been slowly unfolding for them. First with the angel visits, a pregnancy, a birth surrounded by shepherds. But here, as these foreigners celebrate their son I think they understand in a deeper way that this child is not just for them. The community he calls around himself is not just their community. **The epiphany is about more than the identity of Jesus. It’s about the identity of the community God forms around him.**
  5. Even from birth, Matthew is demonstrating **Jesus’ unique capacity to call diverse community into existence.** This is the child who would grow to say, “When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.” Many chapters after this story, Matthew will end his Gospel with **Jesus’ encouragement to his closest disciples to go and make followers of all nations.** This capacity of Jesus to call folks from different ethnic backgrounds, different religious practices, different kinds of stories into his greater story is **revealed in Epiphany right at the beginning,** for those who have eyes to see it.
- F. In the last year, **I think we’ve had what have felt like multiple mini-epiphanies** around what we are doing here at Haven, all of which have happened in conjunction with folks from this community.
1. There was the epiphany around articulating our vision: safe, diverse, Jesus centered
  2. Epiphany around understanding that to live into that meant shattering idols
  3. **One other that I haven’t shared here: the grove of trees.**
    - a) Envisioning prayer group that Ginny led. Praying into our vision and asking God to speak to us through pictures, words, and other means by God’s Spirit.
    - b) Picture of a tree. First I didn’t share cause I thought it was just about me. I’ve had words about that in the past - being a tree, being planted by God, nourished by God’s presence. But this was something different.
    - c) I wasn’t the only tree. I was part of a grove of trees. It was alive and interconnected.
    - d) There were holes where some trees have been uprooted. Other ones that have been transplanted and not sure they really belong. Others that are little saplings taking root.
    - e) **This is what is being formed anew in this season. This grove of trees that don’t look like they belong together.** And yet something organic and alive is taking place. Connections are happening beneath the surface, and our lives are being woven together in a way that testifies to divine presence. Not that dissimilar from a young family worshiping God alongside foreigners of another faith.
- III. So as we end, I want to take a moment to interact with God’s Spirit, as we consider how, on this celebration of Epiphany, we might experience the Manifestation of God, in our own way.
- A. Lead in prayer, and ask folks to consider with Jesus the following:
1. Where might Christ be appearing in unexpected ways today?
  2. Who are those who can perceive it? How might their wisdom surprise us?
  3. Where are we in the story? Are we with those in power who were threatened by the revelation? Are we with those who were too wrapped up in their own expectations or agendas that they missed it? Are we following the contingent who has perceived a new perspective that brings enlightenment and understanding? Are we with the Holy Family who recognize divinity in our midst but need to expand our awareness to receive those coming from surprising places to give us a fuller picture of what God is doing?

**Questions for Reflection and Discussion:**

1. What experiences of “epiphany” have you had?
2. What do you find most provocative about Matthew’s Epiphany story?
3. Where have you found your thinking about God challenged or expanded by an unexpected source?