

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Loving God, we come to your house to find you. We have celebrated with joy the Christmas Season, and now we find ourselves moving into a new season with new possibilities. As we continue the journey into the season of Epiphany and then the sorrows of Lent that follow, let us never forget where we have come. Gracious God, we remember the Christ Child in the manger, and we continue following the call to journey to the manger. You call us wherever we are in life, Holy God, to find you where you present yourself. We search to find the joy along the path you have laid out for each one of us. We search to find the fulfillment of a life dedicated to your timeless ideals. Help us, God, to give you our weighty burdens to live in your joyful service. We give ourselves to you, our concerns, our joy, our praises, our sorrows, and ask you take them to your kind heart, Holy God.

Holy God, today we remember the story of the wise men. We hear their story, understand their journey, and look with awe like them as we surround the manger of Christ. Holy God, we remember their unique journeys to be with the Newborn King, and we recognize that although we do not share the same journey, we also go through our journeys to find the Christ Child as well. Help us, God, to walk the path you have laid out for us and to help others walk that path as best as they can as well. We do not always know which direction you lead us or them, so guide us to be kind, to lift up those around us, to live as well as they can to find where you are directing us all. We pray all these things in the name of the one we seek, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one people...

## SERMON

What does the word "Epiphany" mean? It means a new recognition, a new revelation, something that brings you into new understanding of the world around you. It

is a new understanding that helps us recognize God's work in the world. It is also the name for this holiday that recognizes the arrival of the Wise Men to the Baby Jesus. In that action was an Epiphany. Not only was it seeing God born as a human being, it showed how God relates to all of us and how God works in each of our lives in special ways. Perhaps we all need an epiphany to see how God is guiding us today.

Epiphany is a Holy Holiday that doesn't get much publicity. It is, after all, the recognition of the Wise Men, the Magi, to the Baby Jesus. Why were they wise? They were full of knowledge, educated, regal. But there's one thing that sets these wise men apart: they went on an unexpected journey and came to understand what was at the end of the path: the Newborn King, the Baby Jesus. Their journey tells us something about our journey, for God came to speak to them and guide them in a way that was unexpected but exactly what they needed. Let us follow the Magi on their course to the newborn Jesus and see through them how God is still leading us today.

Before we can get into the scripture, we need to take apart a lot of myth around the story. There are how many wise men? Three. Their names are Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar. Balthazar was an Arabian Scholar. Melchior was a Persian Scholar. Caspar was an Indian Scholar. Great, but none of these things is actually a recorded fact in scripture. It seems apparent that they showed up to the manger immediately with gifts in hand, but it probably took weeks or months, since they came following the star. But we begin scripture at the point where the Wise Men come to visit Rome's ruling authority over Judea, King Herod. "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." These Wise Men didn't originally go out looking for Jesus, and we know this for certain. They must have found out what the star

was about later. First of all, if they had known, they wouldn't have stopped to ask for directions. When they did ask, the priests and scribes utilized scripture, which the Wise Men didn't have. Secondly, scripture doesn't foretell the coming of the Messiah with a star, but they believed that great births would be shown with a star. Nevertheless, they came to realize what they were following and what the star was about. Herod was not pleased. The Magi want to pay the newborn Christ homage, not the current ruler, Herod. According to the New Interpreter's Commentary, this is nothing less than threatening to Herod, the so-called "legitimate" ruler. This is usurping, stealing power, which no good Roman ruler wants at all. He tells them to go and to report back so that Herod can also pay homage...but he's a liar, liar, pants on fire. But the Wise Men went on their way as they did before: following the star to the streets of Bethlehem, where they ultimately beheld the Christ child. They offered their gifts of royalty and adoration, and they worshipped by the Baby Jesus. They left without coming back to the Angry Herod.

We don't know the Magi's names; we don't even know how many there were, only that the Magi brought three gifts to the Baby Jesus. All of this is tradition, passed down through the years. But there is one thing that we do know for certain. The podcast Sermon Brainwave makes a great point. These were not Jewish Wise Men. There was no such thing as Christianity then, so they couldn't be Christian. They were Gentiles, unwelcome folks to the Jews at the time. They were astrologers. They read the stars. They did not know the scriptures, the prophecies, or anything that they were supposed to know in order to look forward to Christ's coming. They were astronomers; they kept their eyes on the stars. These Wise Men were led to the Baby Jesus through their understanding of the stars. Yet, when they arrived, they knew they welcomed the King of the Universe.

Jesus collects one motley crew around that manger. If you look at your standard nativity scene, it's a patchwork of people from all kinds of places and backgrounds. The poor, uneducated shepherds, animals of every kind, and now, we add the elites, the wise men from the east. You had Jews and Gentiles. You have the educated and the uneducated. You have the rich and the poor. You had those who had angels sing to them and you had those who came through their understanding of the stars. You had the natives of the land and travellers from far away. The very nature of the tradition of the three wise men of Balthazar, Caspar, and Melchior is representing the nations of the world come to observe the manger. But this assembly of Wise Men did exactly as they should: they followed their own language, the craft of following the stars, and when they did exactly as they knew how, they beheld the child before them.

This is not just a story that tells us more about the beginning of Jesus Christ on this world. This story tells us something vital about how we live the Christian life and help others in that life as well. It is a clear fact: these wise men were not scholars who originally sent out to find Jesus but eventually came to understand what they were doing. They followed the star, came to King Herod, and declared they were out to find the newborn King of the Jews. These wise men were not oriented to the scriptures, or they would have known they were going to Bethlehem. They had no knowledge of what they were supposed to do, so they asked direction. Over time, they understood that this was the new Throne of God's newborn King. But all that mattered not. This was God's own invitation to take a journey through what they already understood, not scriptures, but the star. God invited them in through their own experience, through what they understood. And when that door was opened, they welcomed the King with open arms because their journey led them there.

When we look at the meticulousness of creation, many see God through it. When you see how the sun rises and sets every day, how the seasons progress through their course, the wonderful strength and fragility of the human body, we see the hands of a Creator weaving it all together. God is revealing God's self in so many ways. Many scientists, when studying any subject, will say they see God speak through the glory of a supernova, the symmetry of an atom, the process of how we eat and breathe and live. This, to them, is the path that leads them to God. Some of us look at those things and find them commonplace or not all that interesting. To them it is everything, for it reveals God's work. It is how they find God speaking to them, how they see the Lord at work. This is called natural revelation. It is its own type of epiphany.

Indeed, we each find God in different ways, through different means. It usually has to do with how God created us, and God certainly created each of us uniquely. Catherine loves to be around other people. She best finds her faith strengthened when she can be and learn with others. That's not necessarily my style. I'm different. I best find God when I'm studying, when I'm reading or when I'm taking something in. I can see how God works in my life and in others, I can see the Gospel displayed through watching any well-written story, movie, or TV show. It's just the way I work. God knows it, and that is how God invites me in to learn, to grow, to become the fullest child of God I can be. Whether you are a scientist, a theologian, a reader, a watcher, a hearer, a doer, an introvert, an extrovert, white collar worker, blue collar worker, it doesn't matter. God calls each of us to journey down our own unique path. You probably find God in ways the person next to you does not, or perhaps in ways no one here does. That doesn't make you bad; it means you were created especially as you are. We each see God working and leading us in different ways.

I think this story speaks volumes about how our God works in the world today, for each person and for the greater world. Here's a direct application. As a pastor, I hear stories all the time from those who are worried about their family members. A lot of people in our lives do not go to church any Sunday or may show any concern for the Christian life. They may show anger toward the church. They may not attend or desire to at all. They may not even want to darken the doors of a church at all. No doubt, it is really troubling when those you love don't show the same respect for the beliefs that you have. If there's one thing this story shows, it is that God is never far away from us at any point of life. It may seem like God is far away, but that's never true. God leads each of us on a journey, and we arrive at the truth, at meaning, at faithfulness at different times. It is truly important that we all live out that journey, because it allows us to find the Christ where and when he presents himself to each of us uniquely.

We each have our journeys of life, and it is important that we take them as they come. I did not come from the cradle recognizing that I was going to be a pastor. I came to that decision when I was good and ready, when it was right. I assume many of you may have the same type of career path. Maybe you knew what you were going to do from the beginning; maybe not. But it's not how you start; it's how you end. At one point or another, many may be shut off to organized religion. Many may think that the church is boring and that there is nothing good in it. Many think that God does not care for them, that God has forgotten them. These are not people to be angry at but people to be loved. These are not people to be scorned but people to be shown care. No matter whether they believe God has abandoned them, God has certainly not; the journey is not over. Remember, God is still at work in every person's life, whether they know it or not. People come to faith at many

different points in their life, but they do it exactly when they should, exactly when faith will mean the most for them, exactly when it will create the best effect on their lives. Each person just needs to follow the path that has been laid out for them, for there is One greater orchestrating it. Like the Magi of long ago, they may see a journey they need to undertake, not knowing that God was directing them, only to understand later that God led them to the Christ child. But this is God's doing, not our own. We are not God; we cannot push people down a path they don't want to go. That's not the love of Jesus Christ. We can only be as loving and caring as possible as they undertake their own journeys. God is calling each and every one of us, those of us worshipping in God's house today, those staying at home, shut off by the church, those who have never understood the story, those who find the story off-putting, those who don't know where home is, those who are far away from home, each and every one of us God is calling. After all, if God can call anyone from across the earth to find the small manger in Bethlehem, what can't God do for us?

The timeless journey continues. The path of the Wise Men led them to follow the star, which led to the manger of the newborn King of the Jews. Even today, God is leading each and every one of us. How we are led depends on each and every one of us, but God is never absent. God is calling each and every one of us to God, through the language and the concepts that we can best understand. At the end of the journey, we find peace. We find fulfillment. We find exactly where God wants us to be. God leads each and every one of us to where we should be, where we are meant to be. Like I've heard before, we can ask God to guide our steps, but we are the ones who have to move our feet. The journey is ready, for every age of our lives, and God lights the way. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.