

Epiphany: A Sacred Journey
Matthew 2:1-12
1.7.18



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“When was the last time that you had an honest dialogue with a non-Christian, in order to attempt to try and understand their own journey and beliefs? What did you learn? Did it prove awkward? Did you find yourself tempted to continue to interrupt them and correct their theology?”

“What significant discoveries have you made in your own journey when you weren’t even looking?”

“Can you recall a time in your own life when God used some ‘unacceptable’ means of revealing himself to you? When you said to someone else, ‘God wouldn’t do that!’?”

“What struggles, temptations, or challenges do you think that both Christians and non-Christians face? What desires and hopes do you think they share? How might the commonalities create the context for honest dialogue?”

“Who are the God-fearers in your world? When is the last time that God revealed something of himself to you through someone whom you had already disqualified? What adjustments might you need to make in order to receive another and join them in their search?”

Teaching Notes...

Let me say, as a Pastor, most of my life has been very public, even though what I really longed for was some sense of ‘quiet-anonymity’. Everything was subject to scrutiny. Fortunately, I had some idea as to that into which I had been called.

Even more challenging, has been the difficulty of being called upon to speak intelligently about God, knowing that other’s opinions of him were being shaped and

formed by my presentation. I have had to find a way to continue to do so, amidst my own honest questions and hesitations.

It has proven difficult, at times, to stand before a gathering of people and speak about the reality of a God that I was seriously, and mostly privately, calling into question. I realized that there are times when this story leaves me feeling so assured and so confident, and times of almost debilitating anxiety and doubt. *But, how could it not? How could such a Story not evoke such feelings of anticipation and hope? How could it not provoke moments of equally intense frustration and doubt?*

I'm convinced that all people, everywhere, are in search of God, even if they don't know it.

I believe that God is seeking us all and longing that we experience his love and assimilate his truth, even though none of us has proven “fully compliant”. I believe that we are all experiencing the presence of God in countless, yet often unnoticed ways, every day.

“For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.” Matthew 5:45

I think what we really need to know is not simply that God exists--- out there somewhere--- but that this God is right here in the thick of our humanness, and although he's not *“tweeting us”* with the stars, he is, in a variety of both subtle and not so subtle ways, attempting to get our attention and win our affection. Not knowing how he will speak or when is what hones our senses; heightens our awareness.

Anytime the church (people who are identified with and identified by the biblical narrative) fails in its mission to take the gospel to the ‘world’, you can be sure that the Holy Spirit is already out in the margins, offering himself to the nameless and anonymous, in an attempt to direct them toward Jesus.

We celebrate this day as “Epiphany” (*appearance; manifestation*)

The term is used to describe an ‘aha’ moment where we suddenly become aware of something surprising; something previously unknown to us or unexperienced by us.

When capitalized, it refers to the church's commemoration of the coming of the Magi. We are immediately met with any number of challenges: Is it *mag-eye*? Or, *may-ji*? Or, *madg-eye*? *How do we know there were only (3)? What's the significance of the gifts? Who were they: kings? Philosophers? Astrologers?*

“**magi**”: translated from a Persian word meaning *“those who are expert in studying the stars”*. In English, it's where we get our word *“magician”*.

But these are not *‘pour milk into the hat’* or *“balloon animal”*, kind of magicians, but those steeped in supernaturalism. These are the ones who were responsible for

determining the correlation between what was going on cosmically (in the “heavens”; realm of the gods) and how that was affecting life on this terrestrial ball. They were looking to make the connection between the “*seen*” and the “*unseen*” (2 Corinthians 4:18). They were, in my estimation, astrologers.

From the outset of the narrative, it becomes clear that this is undeniably a story about “outsiders” becoming “insiders”; people “in the margins” being brought over into the story.

In Matthew’s story, they come from “the East”. I’m not convinced that this is literal geography, but sacred geography. What matters most for Matthew is that they “**pagans**”. The word ‘**pagan**’ is actually the word ‘**ethnos**’, where we get our term “**ethnicity**”.

It is not a word about their character issues, but a word used, in its broadest sense, to refer to “*people outside of the nation of Israel*”; all of those who were not by lineage part of the God-Story; not part of the special arrangement that God had made with Abraham--- not part of the special people.

Most often when we talk about God, we are not talking about God, but the God in whom we believe.

If you are a fiscal conservative, God is a fiscal conservative. If you are scholarly, God is an intellectual. If you are an adventurer, God is a free-spirit. He has some similarities as other’s descriptions, but he’s different. He’s the God of our own formation. Our own experience.

If you are God (which I would like to clarify, you’re not), how do you go about offering yourself in such a way that there is a broad-appeal, that you are never misunderstood, misrepresented, or misquoted, or that all people routinely pursue and defer to you in all matters life?

What if you decide to invest yourself, fully, into humanity, and walk right into the middle of all that you yourself had created and display truth, “absolutely”? (lit. *perfectly embody a thing*) If you chose to do so, you would have to find a way to make yourself accessible to marginalized shepherds, curious astrologers, blue-collar fishing-vessel owners, political pundits, military insurrectionists, priests, poets, and prostitutes.

“Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. For God, in all of his fullness, was pleased to live in Christ.” Colossians 1

“We look at this Son and see the God who can’t be seen. Everything of God finds its proper place in him” (MSG).

Don’t allow your inexperience to preclude your encounter with God.

So determined is God to reveal himself that he will even honor, at times, a misguided pursuit in order to re-direct humanity toward the truth.

Remember, none of the characters in this story had experienced such phenomenon either. Some seem to find Jesus as a result of a very lengthy and intentional search. Some seem to happen upon him (or, rather, he happens upon them!) Some held him in their arms and knew without any phenomenon or fanfare that this was the child of promise. Some weren't even looking.

"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I'."
[Isaiah 65:1] God seeking to get OUR attention!?

Bring people out of the periphery and into your line of sight.

Notice faces, not questionable fashion choices. Imagine what they love and who loves them. See them with God. Know that, at any moment, your lives (stories, worlds) might intersect [e.g. escalator collapse in Atlanta].

Count conversations. Conversations count.

I think people want to talk about themselves. I think people want to talk about what really matters to them (e.g. life, relationships, meaning, dying...not death, God), but only with those who they feel "safe". Without it, all we are left with is Netflix, and online shopping, and mortgage payments, and sex. Small talk.

Good spiritual questions usually lead to more questions. God encounters usually lead to awareness and reflection, not immediate resolution (*"How can this happen? What does this mean?"* Luke 1:34; 2:19)

Creating a culture of conversation does not mean that there we never challenge injustice or another's understanding of truth. I am saying that having first, listened well, we are in a better position to not only authentically hear what the other is saying, but what the Spirit is saying.

Look for God at work outside of the acceptable confines of your own personal creed.

I have discovered that, beyond the boundaries of my own theology, there is a lot of 'rogue spirituality' going on. People are pondering. People are praying. People are lighting candles, and playing the stock market, and smoking weed in search of fulfillment.

Acts 10: *"God-fearer"*. Lives with some recognition of transcendence. Some sense that there is the "other", even if he can't label it or put a name to it. God is an ambiguous term, but one for which there is some sense of reverence.

For the most part, he wants the same things you do. He wants a government that rules fairly and seeks to promote justice. He wants to feel that his life matters. He wants to donate to charitable causes, believing that he is providing assistance to others. He

wants to his children to get a good education and feel that he can put them on the bus without wondering about their safety. He wants to live in meaningful, and mutually-satisfying relationships. He likes a good piece of prime rib!

He has a God-visitation and, interestingly, the angel says, *“I want to put you in touch with a guy named, Peter.”* Peter, as we may be aware, has his own stuff going on. He is on his own journey, which is surprisingly, the same journey.

In the process, Peter will be asked to come to terms, with not only the prospect of “those people” (Gentiles) being welcomed into the Story, but his own prejudices and presumptions about the way God does and doesn’t work. The people that God does and doesn’t love.

“An angel instructed him to summons you so that he could hear your message...” (10:22).

Know that in each personal encounter, the Spirit of God has been the first to arrive. He’s been waiting to introduce you.

Don’t be so quick to label their hesitancy as “resistance”, but a desire to make the best choice possible.

To embrace Jesus as the Messiah is not simply to say, *“Yes, I see enough scriptural evidence to merit believe”*, but to confess: *“I see in this one, this passionate peace giver, the embodiment of all that God is and all that he desires for his creation; and, because I confess that he is ‘God with us’, I commit myself to abandoning my own chaotic and disruptive pursuits of life in order to follow the ‘way of peace’.”*