

Epiphany: The Magi
Text: Matthew 2:1-12
1-6-19



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

“Have you encountered anyone who said to you that they weren’t ‘religious, but they were spiritual’? What do you think they meant by that?”

“When is the last time that you engaged another in conversation regarding their own spiritual journey? Did it make you uncomfortable? Did you find yourself tempted to ‘correct’ them?”

“Do you ever find yourself feeling threatened by/uncomfortable with another’s search? Are you confident in God’s ability to get ‘creative’ in drawing people to himself?”

“Can you recall a time in your own life when God used some ‘unacceptable’ (at least you have deemed it unacceptable) means of revealing himself to you? Why have you become so convinced that God ‘wouldn’t do that’?”

“Where are you noticing signs that God is at work around you? Is it requiring some risky-movement on your part to signal an awareness and willingness to participate? How are those signs encouraging your search for Jesus?”

“What is it about Jesus that disturbs you? Where in your life is your fear of losing control inhibiting you from trusting him? How is the God-data you are accumulating translating into your relationships?”

Teaching Notes...

We celebrate this day as “Epiphany” (*appearance; manifestation*). In the vernacular, the term is used to describe an ‘aha’ moment where we suddenly become aware of

something surprising. When capitalized [Epiphany], it refers to the church's commemoration of the coming of the magi.

This story eases us out the Christmas narratives and back into what we call 'ordinary' time.

Most of the seasons of the Church year are organized around the two major festivals: Christmas and Easter, which are used to mark "sacred" time.

The remainder of the following Epiphany and leading up to Lent is known as "Ordinary Time" [from the word "ordinal," which simply means "counted time"]. Time that counts. This is the category into which the biggest chunks of our lives will fit best.

"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*".

A word from which we get our word 'magician'. These were not backyard birthday party, animal balloon magicians, but a word used to identify those seeking to discover meaning for life in the cosmos; astrologers.

A remarkable event in the 'heavens' signaled to them noteworthy activity on the earth, so they set out to investigate.

The magi are the "outliers" in the story.

Whereas last week's account of Simeon and Anna was about "insiders" realizing fulfillment to an accepted narrative, this account is clearly about "outsiders" bringing brought into the Story. Finding their way home.

In Matthew's record, they come from "*the East*". This is not only literal geography, but sacred geography. What matters most for Matthew is that these 'star gazers' were "Gentiles"--- "**pagans**", if you will. This is significant because Matthew's audience is primarily Jewish.

The word '**pagan**' is actually the word '**ethnos**', where we get our term "**ethnicity**". It's not always used to describe someone's character deficiencies, but used in its broader sense to refer to all those who were not by lineage part of the special arrangement that God had made with Abraham.

There's no consensus as to the explanation of the "star" (e.g. explosion of a super-nova; a comet, UFO?)

"But, none of that accounts for how the star lead them to Jesus?" Here's my posture: if you will at least give me that there's a God, and that he created everything, ex-nihilo (out of nothing), I have no issue with his ability to take some of the 'stuff' and arrange it in such a way that peeked our curiosity and draw us to himself.

“Where does our curiosity originate? What does that suggest about who we are? Why we are?” From what I can tell, we as humans are unique in this search. Your cat may have (9)-lives, but doesn't seem to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to justify any of them.

God seems to have woven into our DNA a desire for himself. That desire often gets confused or misdirected or filled with what we believe valid substitutes, but it's always dissatisfied until it finds its home with God. It's what Solomon calls, *“eternity in the heart”* (Ecclesiastes 3).

Did you notice the journey they took in their discovery of God?

~ They first encounter the **revelation of creation**---- something of 'otherness' which initiates their quest.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. ...”

Psalm 19:1-4

As curiosity-provoking as the natural sense of created-order, it is not enough. We need a different form of revelation (revealing) in order to form and sustain a relationship with this God. Something beyond the God-stats on the back of the card.

~ Upon arriving in Jerusalem, they are **exposed to the ancient writings of Scripture** for clues.

Because spiritual experiences are by nature "experiences," they are inherently subjective. To help us discern if a specific experience is truly from God, we have the **Word and Witness (Spirit)**

When we affirm that the bible is *“God-breathed and profitable”* (2 Timothy 3), we are agreeing that it provides the most reliable measure of truth.

This leaves plenty of space for God to get creative, without compromising his intentions.

~ Finally, they arrive at the **incarnation**; at Jesus.

John 17:3 *And this is eternal life -- to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth.*

John 5:37-40 *"You search the Scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me so that I can give you this eternal life.*

The infant Jesus is not sufficient. It certainly tells us something about God's nature (desire to be available and known), but it doesn't tell us what he is up to. We need Jesus 'all-grown-up'. We need watch him form an identity that was utterly centered in Father. We need to see how he responded to temptation. We needed to see how he

would handle the ones deemed “untouchable”. We needed to see how he would combat anxiety and worry and fear. We needed to see his determination to forgive and refuse to keep lists. We needed to see the lengths to which he would be willing to go to demonstrate his love. We would need to see him die. We would need to see him rise again, so that we might know that this God is both humble and unrestrainable.

Epiphany messes with our tidy theologies and reminds us that grace is much more random and indiscriminate than we care to believe.

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

I have discovered that, beyond the boundaries of my own theology, there is a lot of ‘rogue spirituality’ going on. People are coming to Jesus in ‘unacceptable’ ways.

Sometimes, amidst all that we would classify as ‘*ungodly*’ and ‘*foolish*’, is a sincere desire/hunger for truth (Acts 17 “*Men of Athens, I notice you are very religious...*”) The Spirit, at times, calls us *alongside the chariot* (Philip and the Ethiopian official: Acts 8:26-40) to honor another’s search and, perhaps, become part of the journey with them.

I’m not saying we’re all finding our own path to God [as one who embraces Jesus as “the way”, that sounds wonderfully “PC”, but frighteningly vague]. I do believe, however, that we’re arriving at Jesus from varying points of origin.

“*If it were not true, I would have told you...*” John 14. If you could find a better way than Jesus, he would be the first to tell you to take it!

Doesn’t it make sense that if you are the “*artwork*” (Ephesians 2:10) of a loving, Creator-God--- and you were designed in such a way that your ultimate sense of identity and worth were to be discovered in a relationship with him--- he would go to great lengths to ensure that our hearts would settle for nothing less?

Epiphany suggests that the objective is not simply the “search”. Seeking is about finding.

“... and the star stopped over the place where the child was” (9).

Be cautioned about a spiritual quest for life and truth that does not culminate in Jesus. Signs and dreams can be deceptive if they are not merely *signposts* directing us toward Jesus.

“*If you look for me, wholeheartedly, you will find me*”. Jeremiah 29:14

“*Ask, and you will receive. Seek and you will find...*” Matthew 7

No one's decision to follow Jesus is based on indisputable facts and irrefutable evidences. We aren't offered that. There's a convergence of heart and truth which takes religion out of the realm of concepts and arguments and settles it in relationship with God.