

Epiphany Sunday  
January 3, 2016

**“Seeing the Light”**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 60:1-6 ~ Matthew 2:1-12

I know, I know. Three more days remain in the twelve days of Christmas, but we are jumping the gun and celebrating Epiphany today. The actual Day of Epiphany is Wednesday, but we seldom worship on Wednesdays, so we're celebrating the Epiphany today. The word “epiphany” means a sudden revelation or insight. Epiphanies may seem sudden, but they usually come to people who have been seeking them ... and are therefore ready to see the light when it shines. You can't see the flash if your eyes are closed ... or if you're looking the other way.

In the Christian calendar Epiphany refers to the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles ... the light rising on the people in darkness. During the liturgical season of Epiphany we remember the early events of Jesus' life ... such as the visit of the Magi ... his presentation in the Temple ... his baptism ... his first miracle at the wedding in Cana. In each of these events, Jesus' Messianic identity was revealed to those with eyes to see the light.

Seeking the light is the whole point of Epiphany ... illustrated by the sages who come from the East when they *see* “his star at its rising.” Think of it as the “so what” of Christmas. We have celebrated Christ's birth ... God-in-our-flesh ... God-born-among-us ... God-with-us “always to the end of the world.” But so what? How will we respond?

The Magi are star-gazers ... more than likely astrologers ... a common form of religious augury in those days among the ethnics who worshipped many gods who left clues in the sky. This is Matthew's way of saying, “Even the Gentile gods pay homage to the Christ.”

I looked up the general astrology prediction for January 2016 on-line and it promises:

*That although it has some excessive aspects, the first part of the month will be dynamic, optimistic and constructive. This is because the Grand Fire Triune between Uranus, Saturn, and Jupiter will be stimulated by Mars, and then by Venus and Mercury. The Grand Fire Triune will keep its good intentions after January 12th, but Mars will enter Pisces and will form a dangerous configuration. At the general level, actions can be blocked, troubled or diverted. At the end of January 2016, it will be Venus' turn to form a configuration which can affect, at a global level, harmony, good relationships, cooperation, alliances and even peace.*

Good news, right? I guess so. I actually have no idea what any of it means. While I put no faith in astrology ... whose predictions are always so general as to be generally useless ... and whose “science” was long ago debunked ... I understand that its aficionados are searching for any light that they can find on this wild ride of life.

Matthew says that the Magi set out when they saw the star, and we should give them credit for making the journey. Travel anywhere in that day was dangerous and difficult. But they left their

safe place behind and risked everything to follow the light. Why would they do that? Matthew doesn't tell us.

Nor does Matthew specify how many Magi make the journey. You can be sure they traveled with an entourage for support. They stopped in Jerusalem to give props to King Herod ... the violent and paranoid King of Judea ... sycophant to the Caesar who kept him in power. "Violent" and "paranoid" are a bad combination ... especially in conjunction with "power!" ... so when Herod heard a "King" had been born, he sent *his* wise men searching the books for auguries. They announced: the Messiah" (or "King" with a capital "K,") will be born in Bethlehem. So Herod sent the Magi to Bethlehem and asked them to report back ... though you would think he might have sent his own spies, too ... or maybe an army.

Anyway, the Magi headed for Bethlehem, and surprisingly the star appeared again to light the way. It's only six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem – 5.52 as the crow flies – so the star didn't travel far.

They found the child, but it couldn't be the manger scene that Luke describes. By now Jesus is two or three. They gave him three gifts ... gold, frankincense, and myrrh ... weird gifts for a two year old, even in those days. And then, they headed out. Matthew says they were warned by a dream not to revisit Herod, but I'm guessing their first visit had already given them the heebie-jeebies about that guy!

The sacred imagination of centuries has focused on what Matthew leaves out. The Magi made this arduous expedition ... risked their lives with a notorious tyrant ... finally found the object of their searching ... only to drop off three gifts and go home? Why would they do that? What did they find? What did they see? What did they say? Most of all, *how were they changed?* Inquiring minds want to know! But Matthew says nothing, so sacred imagination fills in details.

In his book, Seeing Salvation, Neil MacGregor illustrates how Christian artists have used the story of the Magi as a "meditation on the meaning of the birth of Christ and why it matters to us now." He shows that in doing so, each generation has developed the story further. The earliest depiction from the second century at the Catacomb of Priscilla already narrowed the number to three, in parallel with the three gifts. Three common looking folks are painted wearing green for life, red for sacrifice and white for purity and presenting gifts to Christ at his birth ... as the dead in Christ will present to him at his return. The Magi are depicted in the Mediterranean style as common people presenting tribute to their Sovereign.

By the sixth century, in the Byzantine mosaics of Ravenna, the symbolic colors continue ... but the Magi have become royal courtiers befitting a Mediterranean court.

In fifteenth century Florence, the Magi are identified with traders ... the dawn of the Middle class ... and the wealth of commerce personified in the Medici family, whose faces Botticelli gives the Magi. Botticelli himself stares out at us beside his rich patrons, as if to ask us what homage we will pay to Christ. But, as MacGregor notes, "'Christ has been incorporated into the club of the powerful.'" I had hoped to project these images on our screen but our projector will not be up and running until the end of the month. If any of you are interested in seeing them I printed them and they are available for viewing on the counter at the back.

Naturally, Christian rulers identified most with their story. Before long, the three men who had come to worship a King were depicted as Kings themselves. So when the reputed relics of the Magi were transferred from Constantinople to Milan to keep them from falling into Muslim hands, and Holy Roman emperor Frederick Barbarossa conquered a rebellious Milan and moved the Magi's bones to his cathedral in Cologne, his successor King Otto IV commissioned a reliquary with the three Kings and *himself* presenting gifts to the newborn Christ.

The reliquary remains in the cathedral of Cologne to this day. Pat Tucker and Dale Bishop saw it on their recent trip to Germany. But that's what Christian art does. It places the old, old story into new settings ... into our own setting to ask, "What does this story mean to us now, today?"

The stories themselves, as *literary* art, were written in the same way ... to erase the time and distance ... and to call us to put ourselves into the story. When we read the Bible ... it reads us. The Epiphany narratives call *you* to have an epiphany. When you read the story of the Magi, it asks: "Are you watching for the light? Are you willing to leave your safe place to seek it? Will you follow the light where it takes you ... pay homage when you find it ... and protect it from the hostile forces that surround it? Most importantly, it asks ... How will you let the light that God gives you ... change you, for God's sake?"

The darkness we know. The light that shines may be but a dim flicker ... a small hope ... a yearning for something more ... a distant doorway inviting a new direction. If you pause to see it, you will know the change you need to make ... what it's time to let go of ... and what it's time to take up.

The story wants to tell you that God will give you a light to follow. But will you have the courage to follow your star when you see it?

Seeing it may mean searching through study and reflection. Seeing it may mean seeking ... asking ... knocking ... through prayer and meditation. Seeing it may call you to a journey ... a spiritual pilgrimage to a distant place ... or a brand new beginning somewhere else. More likely it will mean a long inward journey that brings you to a new self ... and leaves you no longer the same.

Whatever it means for you, I pray for you an epiphany from God ... and I urge you when it comes to follow the light.

Right now, today, the story of the Magi is not about mystery men from the East ... or traders from afar ... or kings with rich gifts. It's about *you* ... seeing the light of Christ coming to birth in *your* life ... and following the light where he leads *you*.

The light may shine dimly and lead you on a long journey of discovery ... or it may burst upon you in inner radiance ... but follow the light that God gives you. "Arise, shine; for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

May we pray?

O God, Give us the courage to follow the star that leads us to you ... the vision to see you with us in surprising visitations of tenderness and toughness that not even a King can control ... and the love to carry you in our hearts until you lead us home. Amen.