

Natalie W. Bell
January 4, 2026
Epiphany Sunday

Epiphany
Matthew 2:1-12

*In the **time of King Herod**, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, **magi**^[a] **from the east** came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we **observed his star** in the east^[b] and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:
⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel.’ ”
⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi^[e] and learned from them the exact time **when the star had appeared**. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, **went the star that they had seen in the east**,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] **they were overwhelmed with joy**. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and **paid him homage**. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

Today is Epiphany Sunday, also known as Wise Men Sunday.

Next to Easter and Christmas,

Epiphany is one of the **oldest Christian holy days**.

It falls on January 6th—the 12th day of Christmas.

And it celebrates the revelation of Jesus to the **Gentiles**,

Especially the wise men who followed the star to the baby Jesus.

It is also one of the most fascinating Christian days---

Full of surprises, in the story, and in its observance.

We think of December 25th as Christmas, and Epiphany as Jan 6th,

But before the year 325, Jan 6th was the celebration of Jesus' birth and the wise men.

Emperor Constantine in 325 changed the observance of Jesus birth to Dec 25th, To coincide with the *Sol Invictus*, the day of the unconquered Sun. And Jan 6th became the feast of the Wise Men.

Different areas of the world celebrate the Wise Men with different traditions. In Puerto Rico, Three Kings Day warrants great celebration, in which businesses are closed and people are feasting. This is a cultural vestige that takes us back to slavery days, when January 6 was the only day off in the entire year for the Afro-Caribbean people. In these celebrations, the traditional black king (known as Melchior) is always at the center.

In the Eastern hemisphere, Epiphany is the celebration of Jesus' baptism, where the "three magi" become the first ones to celebrate the birth of the Messiah.

These "three scholars" are also the first Gentile missionaries to share the good news beyond Judea's borders.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-6>

The story itself is full of SURPRISES.

Pagans from the East see a star and follow it!

Herod is shocked to Eastern visitors looking for the King of the Jews,

When HE held the title, King of the Jews!

And they come bearing strange, costly gifts--- gold, frankincense, and myrrh—gifts fit for royalty.

The visitors are sent to find the newborn,
and then in a surprising dream,
they are warned to return home by another road to avoid the wrath of King Herod.

The whole story is known as Epiphany—a revelation.

When the wise men saw that bright star and followed it,

They were having an epiphany---

According to Miriam-Webster an ***Epiphany*** is
a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something, an intuitive grasp of reality, an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure.

Can you think of a time when YOU had an epiphany?

A sudden realization?

What about an epiphany from God?

Have you ever seen, or felt, or experienced a revelation?

Or, what about just a SURPRISE from God?

Some kind of sign? Beauty? Love?

Isn't a God-sighting, ***a holy SURPRISE?***

We believe that this beautiful, surprising story of the wise men and the star, Is OUR story.

It's part of the ***larger story of our faith*** in Jesus.

We are called to ***be like the wise men,***

seeking our Savior!

We are called to ***pay attention*** to God sightings, and revelations, and follow them!

We are also called to understand that God speaks in the majesty and mystery of Creation--

like that Bethlehem star.

We believe that there really was a brilliant phenomenon in the sky then—

The Bible says they saw a star at its rising.

They were possibly Zoroastrian scholars, who studied the stars,

Watching the constellations, and changes in the sky,

So they noticed a new bright star when it appeared.

What was that star in the sky?

It might have been ***Jupiter and Saturn*** coming together--

It was definitely something bright and brilliant.

Whatever it was, it was so surprising and compelling—

That these men left everything to follow it,

And they brought costly gifts to worship the one they would find!

That star is part of the epiphany—the SURPRISE from God!

Celtic Christianity has a special understanding of these things.

When I was on the Isle of Iona in Scotland last summer,

the birthplace of Celtic Christianity,

I saw this firsthand.
 I saw the beauty of the island, the turquoise water, the smooth lapping stones,
 the gentle waves, the rolling countryside.
 It was like seeing God—everywhere!

And I learned even more about Celtic reverence for Creation.
 Celtic Christians call ***Creation the Big Book*** of faith,
 And the ***Bible is known as the Little Book*** of faith.
 Both books are necessary for faith, and they inform one another.
 We are called to “read” both, and listen to them, in stereo.
 Rev. Dr. John Philip Newell, The Light Within All Life, Day 1, Jan 6, 2013.

We American Christians tend to ***focus on the Little Book—the Bible***.
 But what if we are ***missing*** some of God’s message, and surprise,
 if we ignore the Big Book?
 What happens when we overlook the ***Word of God in Creation?***
 After all, Genesis says that ***God spoke*** things into creation!
 And it was all declared good by God.
 So we can and should see the ***value of Creation***,
 just like we see the value of ***God’s written Word!***

Some are ***hesitant to focus on Creation***.
 But we ***DO believe that God created the universe and all that is in it***,
 and that creation is good, and valuable,
 and God continues to speak to us through it!
Creation has something to say!

Celtic Christians see Creation and the Bible,
 as being in ***conversation*** with one another.
 The Big Book AND the Little Book together,
both necessary for a healthy relationship with God.

If we have ***ONLY have the Big Book of Creation***, like some other religions,
 We can miss the intimacy of God’s relationship with us in Scripture.
 But if we have ***ONLY the Little Book of the Bible***,
 we miss the vastness of God’s universe,
 and the power of God that is found in all life.

Part of the SURPRISE of Epiphany is seeing God in nature!
 When have YOU been surprised by God ***in nature?***

Ever been *surprised* by God's majesty on a mountain,
or at the shore, or in the forest?

What did that surprise teach you? How did it stay with you?

I know that some of the most brilliant sunrises over the ocean,
Are places I can go back to in my mind when times are hard.
What about you?

Don't you think that the wise men went back to the star that way?

That they could see it in their mind, even after they found him, and traveled home?

The SURPRISES of Epiphany do not end there.

It's significant that it was NOT just ONE man following the star.

They were watching and following, *in community!*

We don't know for sure that it was just 3 of them,
only that there were 3 gifts.

Tradition later said there were three, and even named them:
Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar.

I wonder, how do WE watch and wait for God TOGETHER in community?

And how do we pay attention to the surprises God brings our family of faith?

What about the joining of our churches?

Would you have guessed four years ago, that we would be merging today?

Isn't that the surprise of God?

We are called to pay attention to such surprises, right?

You know something else SURPRISING in this story?

These wise men were from the East—not Jews.

They were Gentiles, possibly from Persia (modern-day Iran).

They didn't believe in the God of the Israelites,
and yet they were following the signs of that God!

So often *we think that OUR tradition and culture and way of life*
is the ONLY way.

That have God's revelation, right where we are.

But this story *challenges that assumption.*

It reminds us that *God is surprising,*

And God can be found, beyond our boundaries.

We too need to *follow the stars—wherever* they take us.
 We need to *pay attention* to **God's SURPRISES—wherever we find them!**

This is a **THEME throughout the Bible---**
 God often surprises us with **non-Jews** as heroes of faith.
 Think of the Syro-Phoenician woman in the Gospels and her amazing faith.
 The Good Samaritan who stops to help the injured man.
 The Samaritan leper who says thank you.
 Ruth, a Moabite, who is an example of faithfulness.
 Rahab, a pagan, who is a selfless hero for God's people.

Our God is NOT in a box.

God goes beyond the boundaries that we assume.

Why?

Because ***we NEED each other.***

We CAN'T do faith and life ALONE---if we try that,
 we often miss out on the *surprises*, of what ***God is doing, and who God is.***

So ***Epiphany, is OUR story.***

It is our ***inspiration, and challenge.***

And when we *pay attention* to the *surprising God-sightings, signs,*
 and ***stars*** that God sends our way,
 the result is always the same: ***JOY.***

The Bible says that the wise men were ***overwhelmed with JOY*** upon finding Jesus.
 The ***same thing can*** happen to us, today.
 And couldn't we all use a little more joy?
 When we follow the surprises God puts in our lives—we ***find joy.***

That's the ***Good News of Epiphany.***

And today I want us to ***take that Good News home*** with us,
 And think about it all year!

I want ***each of us to take home a star-word for 2026.***

Maybe you've done this before.

It's a simple ***word***, written on a ***star***, in honor of the ***Star of Bethlehem.***

They are all ***faith-words***,

each one is applicable to every one of us.

If you are not here in person, you can **still get a star,**
just contact me or the office—

And some will be sitting outside my office for a couple weeks.

OR, you can write down a faith-word that comes to your mind right now.

It can be any **WORD** that draws you closer to God—

like *faith, grace, prayer, hope, or trust...*

And then, I encourage you to *reflect* on the word, ***all year long.***

And pay attention to the ***surprises God brings you,*** through this word.

Put it somewhere ***prominent,*** to see every day.

Think ***about*** it.

Look up in the ***Bible.***

Allow it to ***speak*** to you, even if at times you resist it.

Let it remind you of God's ***presence in your life.***

And know that it is a ***GIFT*** from God that will ***keep on giving to you.***

It's something you can ***hold onto,*** in times of trouble.

These words are little ***HOLY SURPRISES,***

Like light shining in the darkness.

Now ***let us stop and pray for God*** to use these words in our lives:

Loving God, You have given us these words to bring us closer to you. Help us to be open to the gifts and surprises that you offer us. We do not fully understand what this word might mean for our faith, but we receive it with gratitude and pray that your Spirit will enable us to live into it with intention and faithfulness. May we learn from this word and this gift. This we pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Friends, may God surprise each and every one of us.

And for that, all God's people can say together, Amen.