

## **The Star Shines Still**

Isaiah 60:4-6 & Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany ~ January 6, 2019 ~ Pastor Jo Ramsey

Do you hear what I hear? This holiday season, we've been celebrating our beloved carols and using them as a window into Christmas.

We discovered that God's redemption begins with His presence. Emmanuel means "God with us." In the Messiah, God comes close enough for comfort.

Next, we sang with the angels, angel agents to be precise, who accept their mission, and promise that with God, nothing is impossible.

Our journey continued to the little town of Bethlehem, where we found that there is hope in the night...hope in every night...hope in and from that holy night.

We met the shepherds on the mountain top, sharing good news of great joy! Jesus has been born! They inspire us to do the same on our own mountains, witnessing to the peace, grace and love of Christ!

And finally on Christmas Eve, that most holy night, we remembered that despite all the reasons for feeling hopeless or defeated, we are worthy in God's eyes. God loves us, loves the whole world enough to send His son, Jesus.

But of course, now the Christmas songs no longer play on the radio, and most of us are ready to move on to a new year. But we aren't quite finished.

Today, we celebrate Epiphany which marks the arrival of the wisemen at the manger. It occurs twelve days after Christmas, which remains Christmas Day for Orthodox Christians. You can thank me that we aren't singing The Twelve Days of Christmas! Instead, we celebrate the song, "We Three Kings" which tells the story of the Magi's journey.

And so it goes...

*Star of wonder, star of night, star of royal beauty bright,  
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*

We know the story...The wisemen, or magi, are astrologers from the east. They study the stars. They have spotted a new star. They are excited! They know what this means---a new king has been born! So they go to Jerusalem to speak with King Herod. He calls his advisors, and they determine the prophecy is tied to Bethlehem. Herod sends the magi to find the baby king, and instructs them to return, so he can go as well. When they find Mary and the baby, the wisemen are overwhelmed with joy. They fall down and worship Jesus, offering him gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. Then, having been warned in a dream, they return home by another road.

Epiphany is so named because Herod literally asks the wisemen, "When did you see the epiphany of the star?" "Epiphany" comes from two Greek words—a verb, phanio, that means

“to shine” and a preposition, epi, that means “on.” So the noun “Epiphany” literally means “a shining on” and is translated “an appearing” or “a manifestation.” This story really features two epiphanies---Both the star, which appears and shines down upon the manger, and Baby Jesus himself, the light of the world, who reveals God’s love for all people.

These days, when someone says they’ve had an epiphany, it means they’ve had a breakthrough or sudden realization. Perhaps it’s about something simple, such as this poor fellow who’s not enjoying Breakfast at Tiffany’s with Audrey Hepburn, but Breakfast at Epiphanies, where he realizes that donuts are making him fat.

For people of faith an epiphany means much more. In his book Telling Secrets, author Frederick Buechner writes about his teenage daughter’s struggle with anorexia. Buechner reflects, “I remember sitting parked by the roadside, terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter’s illness and what was going on in our family, when out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary I needed most to see exactly then. The word was TRUST, ... and for me it was an epiphany.”

He goes on to explain, “the owner of the car turned out to be a trust officer in a bank, and not long ago, having heard my story along the way, he found out where I lived and brought me the license plate itself. It sits propped up on a bookshelf in my house to this day. It is rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen.”

Have you ever had such an epiphany? Can you remember a time when you suddenly saw something in a new way, when God spoke to you a word of comfort or challenge? Have you spotted a star on your horizon, and sensed that God was calling you to follow? Such stars might feel like a sudden insight or intuition, or they may surface through an experience or conversation. They are awakened in us by the Holy Spirit, and often come when we least expect them.

These invitations from God offer us hope and promise. They call us westward, toward the horizon, away from our familiar surroundings into something new. Think of it, the west has always symbolized the great, uncharted, unknown promised land. In the Magi’s journey, we hear echoes of God’s call of Abraham and God’s promise to Moses.

The journey of faith is rarely easy. When a glimmer of light beckons us to follow, and we do, we encounter times of transition and uncertainty. Following God’s star requires courage. The road will be dark and unfamiliar. We may not know where we’re headed. We will not always see the star. We must trust that it is there, above and ahead of us, waiting for nightfall.

We might wish our path was as clear as this exceptionally cool trail in the Netherlands, designed to resemble Van Gogh’s *Starry, Starry Night*. If only the route to find God was so obvious and inviting. If only the way to the manger was so easy to navigate.

Sometimes, we may wish we never left the comfort of home, but often, we have no choice. After Superstorm Sandy, a man whose home had sustained terrible damage in the gale-force winds,

noted, "Sometimes you have to lose the roof to see the stars." The in-breaking of God can be like that...a painful disruption, filled with change and loss, but it can provide us a whole new perspective, one that changes us forever.

That's what happens to the magi...their encounter with the living God, made manifest in the Christ child, overwhelms them. They experience the mystery of God and are transformed. They have an epiphany!

Today, we celebrate Communion, which seems a fitting way to begin the new year. Communion can be an epiphany of sorts. Remember after the resurrection, Jesus joins two disciples as they walk along the road to Emmaus? Though the disciples talk at great length with Jesus, they do not recognize him. Later, he sits down to dinner with them. Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it and gives it to them. Then their eyes are opened and they recognize him. It is Jesus! In the sharing of the meal, they have an epiphany! Luke says, they get up at once and return to Jerusalem.

The wisemen, on the other hand, avoid Jerusalem altogether. They go home by another road. Their story doesn't end at the manger. And neither does ours. God has met us in Bethlehem. He will find us again in the breaking of the bread. He waits for us in this new year.

Today, we begin another leg of our journey. Where will you go? What new horizon lies out west? What star will you follow?

As the poet (T.S. Eliot) says, "We must not cease from exploration, and the end of all of our exploring, will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.... For last year's words belong to last year's language, and next year's words await another voice. And to make an end is to make a beginning."

Here's to new beginnings and an amazing journey n 2109!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.