

# Epiphany: Star of Wonder, Star of Night

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

## Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

## Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

'In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'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 my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

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."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.'

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – Epiphany: Star of Wonder, Star of Night

How many of you *didn't* receive ordered Christmas presents in time for the unveiling on December 25?

It's okay! You're not late! You even have the Bible to back you up!

The magi are the reason we have a tradition of giving presents in the name of Jesus to begin with. And they didn't arrive until well after the Christ-child's birth. The wise men offered Jesus gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—not toys for a child, but gifts for a king.

So Epiphany is the last day of the Twelve Days of Christmas we call Christmastide. So after Epiphany, you can let your HOA know that you have official permission to take down your Christmas lights and Christmas tree!

But seriously, what Epiphany is about is the day when the Star of Bethlehem, a very bright moving star, came to a rest just above the spot where Jesus lay, ending its journey from the East and leading a caravan of Magi to the Christ child.

The word Epiphany literally means a "shining forth" from some source of light. Like the Magi, we are a seriously "star-struck" culture.

As a kid I loved the TV show I liked was *Star Search* hosted by Ed McMahon. It was kind of a precursor to *American Idol* or *America's Got Talent*. We were on the lookout for the next star.

It's the "stars" that dominate social media and dictate popular styles and attitudes. We follow all kinds of "stars," —

- Hollywood stars, rock stars, and celebrity stars.
- Sports stars, super-stars, and all-stars.
- We follow YouTube stars, dancing stars, and pawn stars.
- We look to Michelin three-star restaurants, four-star movie reviews, and five-star generals.
- Whether we take it seriously or not, we're curious about signs of the zodiac or what animal we are on the Chinese food placemat. I'm year of the Rat, btw!

We need Epiphany because it focuses upon the only star that really matters—the Jesus star. The magi remind us we've got to trust the Jesus star. Follow that star and live a starry-eyed life. It's not a lucky star, but a lodestar that guides us along our journey of life and faith.

Epiphany reminds us to learn from the enlightened wise men who upon seeing the star "rejoiced with a very great joy" and followed that yonder star until it led them to the Christ child. Take the Wise Men's lead and follow the Jesus star. It's the only one that will take you home by taking you to new places. It is the only one that will make you a rising star and not a shooting star.

Follow the Jesus Star.

I learned from Leonard Sweet that the word “celebrity” comes from the Latin term for “star bright” (cele means “stellar” or “starry” as in “celestial”). Celebrity also comes from the old French for a “solemn celebration” or “honored one.” That is why we call celebrities “stars”—they are the “bright stars,” the shining lights that rise above the rest. Even the vegetable “celery” means star—*just kidding I made that up.*

We’ve got to be careful of what stars we follow in life. We too “follow” celebrity stars. We want to act like them, dress like them, live like them, talk like them, look like them. We become obsessed, star-struck with their every move—who they’re dating, who they’re breaking up with, what they ate for lunch, and all the juicy details of their latest brush with the law. Sometimes we can end up “following a star” more attentively than we do our own lives or Jesus, the bright morning star.

Of course, some of us choose a different star pattern and constellation. Instead of following “celebrity” stars we make our selves our own “stars.” We think the earth revolves around us. We do what we want to do. We “go our own way,” we “live our own life,” and croon our way through life boasting that we’re doing it “my way.” Call it independence, call it individualism, call it narcissism. Whatever you call it, it’s light comes not from the Son, but from ourselves. And in reality, it’s a lot more like the Death Star in Star Wars when “it’s all about me.”

In this week’s text from the gospel, Matthew describes some ancient people who also followed stars. It’s only Matthew that mentions the Wise Men. The other three gospels don’t mention them. Its uniqueness has not kept it from being a central part of the birth story of Jesus. No one has a “crèche,” a nativity scene, that doesn’t include three dignified figures worshipping the Christ child in the manger.

Matthew’s introduction of this week’s text is so familiar to our stories of the Nativity that we don’t appreciate how bizarre the inclusion of this part of Jesus’ family history really is. What Matthew does is open up the Christmas story to a world beyond the confines of Bethlehem, to include a caravan of mysterious foreigners simply named “Magi” who came to Jerusalem asking for directions to a newborn “king of the Jews.”

The term “magi” describes a learned one, who was not only a scholarly astronomer, but a wizardly astrologer. The magi believed that the stars in the heavens foretold and revealed events that would transpire on earth. King Herod and the Jewish scholars provide information the magi are seeking about the star—some pretty good directions:

“Go to Bethlehem—a small village just a few miles south of Jerusalem, the ancestral home of King David.”

Even though the Jewish scholars got it right, they show less interest in and curiosity about their own prophesy than these foreigners from the East.

After the many months, possibly years, these magi have spent “following the star,” they are now “overwhelmed with joy.” The star is at a standstill. Their long journey is finally over. Bethlehem is indeed the end of their pilgrimage—and the beginning of a new journey.

I love the magi. I'm so glad they made their long trek to pay homage to the Christ child. The magi are the "odd ducks" in the Christmas story. Think about it—they were the outsiders. The people outside the world of Judaism. The outsiders understood better than the insiders the miracle God was pointing to in Christ. They could read the sign of the times—they were paying attention to and following the trail of clues God was leaving. They journeyed through the space of foreign lands to follow this "star" when those who lived just a few miles away didn't get up from their chairs, much less get on their camels to go to Bethlehem.

The magi followed the Nativity Star, the "Jesus star," without hesitation. It took them across many miles, unknown lands, hostile territory, and into the courts of a genocidal, evil king. But they persevered. They followed the star until it led them to the truth they had been seeking. The star led them to the fulfillment they sought. They found the Messiah, the "king of the Jews."

They were not unprepared for the Epiphany—they didn't come empty-handed. They came bearing gifts and worshipped this small child and offered him presents that were worthy of a great king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

This Epiphany, may God give you the eyes of the magi who saw the star at its rising.

- May God give you the wonder of the magi—who were open to God moving in mysterious and surprising ways, blowing away their assumptions and expectations.
- May God give you the feet of the magi who didn't just stargaze, but followed where the star led them.
- May God give you the generosity of the Magi, opening your treasure chest of gifts and laying them at the feet of Jesus.
- May God give you the dreams of the magi to inspire and lead and guide in paths of righteousness.

Like the wise men, may you come near to Christ and worship him. And as you follow the Jesus star, may you shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.

**Amen.**

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