

**EPIPHANY**  
**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene**  
**Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**January 6, 2002**

Today is the twelfth day of Christmas, the Feast of the Epiphany, the day the three wise men arrived at the cradle of the baby Jesus, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Back in 1990 or 1991, very early in my ministry, I was gone on a Sunday about this time of year. We invited a local United Church of Christ minister to preach, and she chose the topic of “Epiphany,” since it was about that time on the church calendar—and it is always good, is it not, for church people to reflect upon how church holy days relate to their lives. On the assumption that knowledge of the Feast of Epiphany is universal in congregations based in the Christian tradition, she preached about the importance of the idea as we usually define it in modern times: “a moment of sudden intuitive understanding; flash of insight,” stemming from the root meaning of “an appearance or manifestation of the divine.” (Barnes)

Cynthia [then Scanlin, now Brandt] says that she began to be aware, early in her sermon, of a certain puzzled look on the attentive faces before her. It was not until congregational commentary, however, that it hit her. She says, “It hadn’t occurred to me that Unitarians didn’t know what the holiday of Epiphany is—I should have known!”

Today, on the day of the Feast of Epiphany, over a decade after Cynthia noted our relative ignorance of Christian history, we address that lack, reviewing the story so that we may explore the theme. The figurative meanings of the word are of vital significance to all on the religious path: “a moment of sudden intuitive understanding, flash of insight;” “an appearance or manifestation of the divine.” All souls long for the light of the Great Mystery, even we Unitarian Universalist souls, who shy away from old, suffocating or oppressive concepts of the divine.

Even in ignorance of the story or the feast day, we ask, “How may we live our lives so that we are more likely to experience epiphanies?”

What our spirits long to experience is not the presence of some judgmental, human-shaped, removed-from-earth Presence In the Sky. We long for the healing experience of something more like what 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet William Wordsworth felt, when he visited the idyllic landscape around Tintern Abbey, for the second time, in 1798. On his first visit, in his early twenties, he had simply appreciated its beauty. Later, at the ripe old age of about 28, he experienced an epiphany, linking his soul’s knowledge of humanity and all its heart-wrenching conditions, with a vast sense of God in everything and beyond.

For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity  
.....  
.....And I have felt  
.....a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things. (ll. 95-102)

Almost exactly two centuries later, Sam Keen experienced—in the spiritual mecca of a sports bar in Reno, Nevada—the same epiphany, appropriate to his time, the very late 20th century. As our Sam read:

...the flying theater invites us to remember that we are creatures of earth and air. Like the grass of the field, the wind passes over us and we are gone.... Yet we are animated by an insistent urge to transcend our limits, to rise up on the wings of hope, to soar. (218)

Each man, appropriately to his place in time, lit up with a sudden insight into the intimate relationship—the interconnectedness, the inseparability—between the Divine and the human. Each was seized by the knowledge that earthbound humanity, with its still, sad music, also flies, and sings the music of God. Neither Wordsworth nor Keen was striving in some linear, rational way to capture the knowledge; both lived their lives in openness to Mystery; both received the epiphany in “altered states” of readiness, when they had allowed themselves to fall into a humble place of receptiveness. Wordsworth practiced the now-conventional openness to nature; Keen allowed his brain to become slightly unhinged as he half-watched, with unfocused eyes, four TV screens at once.

I, like Wordsworth and Keen, have personally received the gift of insight into the staggering oneness of it all in unexpected places, in times of suffering or joy: Christmas Eve, 1997, as this congregation sang “Joy To the World,” on the very first time we worshipped in this sanctuary; in the arms of a loved one; on a mountaintop in the Brooks Range of Alaska, inside the Arctic Circle. Perhaps you have had such experiences, too. I wish and hope and resolve to pay more conscious attention this year, this century, this millennium, to be as open to the grace of epiphany as I can be. Perhaps this year—this century, this millennium—you hope for that openness, too. Perhaps we all, on this first Sunday of 2002, this Feast Day of the Epiphany, may resolve to change our Western, material- and goal-driven lives a little, to make ourselves just a bit more available to those “sudden insights,” those manifestations of the divine.

What do we have to do with that strange little Bible story, though? Why is it important, this millennia-old story of these “wise men from the East” (New Jersey?) on their camels, slogging across 1000+-miles of desert, in search of the King of the Jews? What does it mean to us, here and now in the war-skewed, technologically-advanced 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The wise-men tale appears only in the gospel of Matthew, quite obviously part of a different version of the birth story from the familiar Luke narrative. Clearly, they both cannot be “literally true.” (Probably neither.) But we do not reflect upon scripture—any tradition’s scripture—for its historical accuracy. We take a different approach to religious teaching than we do to history. We ask, “Why have human beings chosen to keep this story in a Holy Writ honored by millions, over centuries? What importance can it have for our questing souls? What meaning can it have for our hearts, a meaning that renders ‘historical truth’ irrelevant for the moment?”

The story takes up the first twelve of the second chapter of Matthew. That’s all.

There are some “wise men,” who live in the East (Probably Persia)—magi, men who knew astronomy, who were intimate with the workings of the heavens, and who also read the stars for their significance. The magi have long known a certain prophecy about a star which would herald the birth of the king of the Jews. They see that star. So they travel to Jerusalem to ask King Herod (one of the occupying Romans, definitely not a Jew) about the birth. Herod hasn’t heard about this coming-Jewish-king phenomenon. Understandably, from his point of view, he gets alarmed at news of a possible upstart monarch and he calls his Jewish advisors in for counsel. They tell him about the prophecy of a king’s birth in Bethlehem. He then tells the Wise Men, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have

found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” (Mt. 2:8) [He was lying, in case you hadn’t caught that.] The star of prophecy becomes the guiding star, and the caravan of magi are taken right to the child and his mother, whereupon they fall down and worship, and give the exotic and precious gifts they have brought: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The final sentence of their part of the story says, “And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.” (Mt. 2:12)

That’s it. That’s the bare bones of the Epiphany story. In some centuries of the Common Era, the Feast of Epiphany has been second only to Easter in importance, signifying the coming of Christ to the whole world. In modern times—especially in Protestant traditions, and in the West—this story is little known and less celebrated. But it has meant a lot to humankind, and may still serve as a reminder, is we wish to listen. It is a story of people who saw God on earth and were changed by the encounter, as we all must be. We, too, return home by another way, if we are open enough, humble enough, have faith enough, set time aside enough that we receive the blessed gift of grace that is called epiphany. We are forever changed.

Because the story is so sparse, we have embellished it over the years, to enrich our imaginations as we reflect upon what it must have been like—what it must *be* like, to glimpse an intersection of God and humanity.

We post-Bible humans have decided, although the story does not say, that there are three kings—after all, there were three gifts. (Eastern tradition sometimes says there were twelve, or some other significant number.) We have named them, that they may become more real: Kaspar, and Melchior, and Balthazar. The Bible just says they are wise men from the east. We have made them kings, willing to make a terrible trek over 1200 miles of burning and freezing deserts—we want it to be clear that the highest and most powerful may open themselves to holiness, a holiness that shows up in the lowliest of settings. We picture them as a black man and a brown man and a white man, kneeling before the Holy Mother and her baby—because we know that epiphany belongs to all.

There is a children’s story that tells the Epiphany tale from the viewpoint of a Jewish servant to the Kings. This fictional character says:

When I say “stable,” I really don’t mean a stable. It was the spot on which all the light from heaven had descended. I say stable, manger, donkey and ox, Wise Men of the world, where the East, the West, the South, and the North kneeled down—black men, white men, Jews, Indians, kings, refugees, and all the animals of creation. (Lichtveld)

That’s what it is about. It is a Unitarian Universalist message: the holy is always a part of All That Is. It is to be found shining in a barn in year One or so of the Common Era. It is to be found and re-found on an English hillside in 1798. It is to be found in a sports bar in a gambling mecca in 1999. It is to be found in our loves and our hates and our dailiness, in all the sublimity and ridiculousness of human living.

We, like all people of all times and all places and all human categories, may be graced by knowing the Holy. We may receive it if we consciously make the journey. If we remember that it is not under our direct control. If we understand it can show up anyplace. If we keep our eyes open for it in every single place we are.

And, if, like the Wise Men, we fall on our knees and offer our gifts, we will be changed. We will return home by another way, resuming our daily journeys on slightly different roads. We will find ourselves part of the holiness of the world.

May it be so.

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