

Epiphany Sunday

Is. 60:1-6 Ps. 72 Eph. 3:1-12 Matt. 2:1-12

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Jan. 4, 2026

On this Sunday, as we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, which is officially celebrated on January 6th, and as we begin what in the Church year is known as the “season of Epiphany” (which extends from now until Ash Wednesday), it’s helpful to remember that the word “epiphany,” which comes from the Greek word “epiphaneia,” is usually translated as “manifestation,” or “revelation,” and is used in the Church during this season to speak of the ways in which Jesus’s incarnation “made manifest” or “revealed” the presence and essence of God, beginning with the story of Jesus’ birth and extending into the stories about his baptism and his first miracles... (stories we will hear throughout the Epiphany season)...

It's a beautiful word, and rich in meaning, as we will see over the next six weeks as we hear stories about Jesus that give us glimpses (epiphanies) of God’s nature, God’s identity, God’s way of being in the world...

But understanding the word “epiphany” only as a bright and momentary “ah-ha” (**as if it’s only about seeing God made manifest in Jesus, with no implications for our being**), is far from what any of the Gospel writers intended, including Matthew, whose story about the Wise men’s visit to the manger is the Gospel text appointed for the Feast of the Epiphany...

Matthew's intention in telling the story the way he did being much more in line with H. Richard Niebuhr's definition of the word as he writes, *"An Epiphany is a moment when an important truth suddenly becomes clear, and we can reinterpret our past and rethink our way forward in light of it... An Epiphany is a moment when an important truth suddenly becomes clear, and we can **reinterpret** our past and **rethink** our way forward in light of it..."*

A definition of the word that implies something about the "epiphanous" moment beyond "seeing" only; something so unexpected and unsettling, so deadly to "what is" and so alive to "what could be," it causes the one having the epiphany to "reinterpret their past and to rethink their way forward in light of it"

Not unlike what happens to some people when they come to our neck of the woods in Maine for the first time, thinking they've just come for a little vacation... and then standing on a rocky shore looking out over the waters of Penobscot Bay, suddenly realize the word "home" has taken on a whole new meaning...

Or, not unlike what happens to most people when they fall in love... Like me when, in 1977 I came to Maine to begin a new life in a new place all alone (to prove I was one strong capable woman), and then one day soon after arriving, saw this guy walk into the Unitarian Universalist Church in Ellsworth for a Gilbert and Sullivan rehearsal wearing a beat-up old blue jean jacket and a peace button, and sporting a head of wild long hair filled with sawdust... That most epiphanous moment suddenly causing me to reinterpret my former plans and leading me to rethink my way forward in light of it...

Or, in a more theological vein, not unlike the day when a seminary professor, giving a lecture on God's grace, said to those of us in attendance, "God's grace isn't given you know, not even unconditionally, in that sense most of us have learned, which posits God in some place removed, giving out heaps of grace to grateful recipients... No," he continued, "grace isn't given... Rather, it's "a given" ... like the air we breath... in every here and every now... here, there, everywhere, free for the taking, for the breathing in... just as God's presence is..."

That shift from grace being "given" to grace being "a given" being for many us seminary students a moment of epiphany *when an important truth suddenly became clear, and we were invited (challenged) to **reinterpret** our past theological understandings of the nature of God and the meaning of grace, and to **rethink** our way forward in light of it...*

It is this sense of "Epiphany" that Matthew intended for the folks in his early Christian community as he invited them to see in the person of Jesus glimpses of God's presence, God's nature, God's identity, God's way of being in the world...

And while we could say that the entirety of Matthew's Gospel is intended to be a series of such epiphanies, the portion of Jesus' birth narrative from the 2nd chapter of Matthew appointed for this morning is a brilliant overture to the rest of the Gospel in this regard, giving its hearers and readers glimpses of God that, if seen as Matthew intended, would be so unexpected and unsettling, so deadly to "what is" and so alive to "what could be," those glimpses would most certainly cause

their readers to “reinterpret their past and to rethink their way forward in light of it...” and perhaps even, as Matthew’s Wisemen decided to do, to return home by a different way.

And the way I can best speak of Matthew’s intention as he told the story the way he did, is to go by way of the Christmas pageant we had every year at Redeemer Lutheran Church with our Sunshine folks taking the parts of the characters in the story...

Now what you have to know is that for about 15 years Redeemer hosted a worship service at 1:00 on the third Sunday of every month for folks from the larger community who were “differently-abled” ... Many of them living in group homes... some of them non-verbal in the way we understand that word... A large number of them in wheel chairs, which required us to take out our beautiful old wooden pews and to put in movable chairs so we could fit 15 -20 wheelchairs into the sanctuary on Sunshine Sunday... (Never has there been a better reason for a congregation rather set in their ways to let go of their beloved old pews).

So, every year, on the third Sunday in December, the Sunshine folks would don the beautiful pageant costumes made years before by a gifted Redeemer seamstress... And while my memories of those pageants run together a bit, I will tell you some of what I saw over the years...

- I saw Eugene, a big burly guy whose way of communicating came by way of grunts and smiles taking the part of a camel, the camel head sitting lopsided on Eugene’s head, as he grinned from ear to ear in his wheelchair...

- I saw Scott, playing the part of a shepherd, his fingers traveling over the book of Christmas carols printed in Braille by one of our Redeemer members, as he sang in full volume...
- I saw Karen and Julie, both of them playing the part of Mary one year because neither would take the part of any other character in the story, Karen refusing at the end of the pageant to give up the baby Jesus she was holding, saying in her somewhat obstinate way, "I am not letting go of Jesus."

Every year there were Sunshine friends in costumes wandering around the chancel area as the story was told because they couldn't stand still... Every year there were folks who probably had limited understanding (as we understand that word) of what they were doing up-front dressed in a sheep costume or in the robes of a wiseman from the East... While others understood in ways too deep for words... Like camel-clad Eugene, who broke down in sobs every year as we ended the pageant with "Amazing Grace."

And what I want to say, is that every year, as our Sunshine folks told the story of Jesus' birth by becoming the characters assembled at the manger, everyone in that room was given a glimpse of what Matthew was intending for the people in his early Christian community to see...

Which is a God who breaches the boundaries of traditional faith, declaring God's embrace of grace and love "a given" for all people...

Among them, as Matthew makes clear, folks "from away" ... namely the Wisemen, Gentiles with no allegiances what-so-ever to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... These Magi who practiced the "dark

arts” of astrology and divination being the very ones, according to Matthew, who were the first ones to recognize in the baby Jesus the Messiah of God for whom the Jewish people had been waiting forever so long... (If you were a devout Jew who had been faithful to the covenant your whole life long, and who, in the later decades of the 1st century wanted nothing more than to celebrate with joy the story that declared Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah, can you imagine how unsettling it would have been to hear that Gentiles from “away” were the first to recognize the Jewish Messiah in the baby Jesus?)

Not so different perhaps, from our Sunshine service friends at Redeemer Lutheran Church, many of whom had not one iota of doctrinal understanding when it comes to the teachings of the Church, but who told the story of Jesus’ birth anyway, taking it out of our pious and learned Lutheran hands, and making it their own...

Both Matthew and our Sunshine Service friends offering epiphanies of a God who blows the boundaries of traditional faith wide open for the sake of love... Both offering *moments when an important truth suddenly becomes clear, and we can **reinterpret** our past and **rethink** our way forward in light of it...*” Offering us the possibility, the freedom, as well, as Matthew might say, to return home by a different way...

That boundary-breaching God, Matthew also makes clear, coming not as people expect Gods to come, **but as a God who reveals God’s self in hiddenness...**

The fullness of God's infinite glory hidden in a baby born on the margins of the Roman Empire to two insignificant Jewish parents... A fullness of Sacred glory that would later be hidden in the work and witness of Jesus as he lived among the sick, the poor, the reviled, the outcasts, revealing to the world what it means to have mercy, to do justice, and to bring the fierceness of God's love to the halls of power...

A fullness of glory that would (in short order) be hidden most profoundly in that moment when Jesus took into himself all the hatred the world had to give, and gave back only love... + "The glory of God hidden in its opposite," as Luther would say...

Reminding us that if the fullness of God's infinite Glory and presence is hidden here +, then it is also hidden in a Christmas pageant with a cast of folks most of the world considers to be of little value... One of whom, in her refusal to let go of the baby Jesus when the pageant was over, opened my eyes to see a connection she had to Jesus that was far deeper than my own...

Making of the experience an Epiphany for me, I guess you could say...

The kind of epiphany Matthew intended for his fledgling Christian community as he told the story of Jesus' incarnation, beginning with his birth... an epiphany of a God so determined to **breach every limiting and restrictive religious boundary and to slip silently into every dark and deadly moment of human existence**, the unsettling and beautiful truth of it would cause people to "reinterpret their past and to rethink their way forward in light of it"... offering them as well, the possibility, the freedom to return home by a different way...

This is the gift offered to us this Epiphany season... The gift offered to us in the whole of the Christian story... The gift of seeing in Jesus something so unexpected, so unsettling, so deadly to “what is” and so alive to “what could be” it causes us to reinterpret our past and to rethink our way forward in light of it...

The gift of seeing in Jesus the infinite presence and glory of God... a given... hidden even in the most God-forsaken times and places of human existence, free for the breathing in, the taking in... Free for the receiving, the conceiving... Free not only for our seeing, but for our being as well...

Each of us, all of us, freed by love for the sake of love...

To deny hatred any power over our hearts,

To defy Herod any power over our lives,

To decry the suffering of the world,

And to return home by a different way... in the name and in the way of Jesus...

