

- 1) **What's an EPIPHANY? A quick answer comes to mind: AN "AH HA" MOMENT—**
a moment when a sudden flash of insight comes over you
a moment when seemingly unconnected things all "come together,"
and send you in a promising new direction.
A classic instance (literally) is a story told about the ancient Greek scientist Archimedes.
The king wanted to know whether a crown he'd been given was made of pure gold,
or just of base metals overlaid with gold.
Archimedes was told to find the answer without cutting the crown—
told to find the answer, or the king would cut off his head.
Archimedes, not surprisingly, sweated over the problem long and hard, getting nowhere.
One day, however, immersed in his bathtub,
out of the blue, the principle of displacement burst into his mind.
Realizing he'd solved the puzzle and saved his life, Archimedes jumped from the tub
and ran through the streets, naked, shrieking: *EUREKA! I found it.*
Epiphanies CAN come like that; but not all epiphanies arrive as Eureka moments:
and not all seeming EUREKA moments turn out to be epiphanies of living, lasting light.
The "light" they seem to shed can sometimes lead to dark places.

- 2) **Today is the Eve of the Feast of the Epiphany, when, as Matthew tells the story,**
a star that had been leading astrologer-magicians on a long journey—
a star that, approaching journey's end, they somehow seemed to lose track of—
THAT star reappears in their awareness, and to their "overwhelming joy,"
it leads them to the child they both worship and seriously gift.
Led by that star, and getting input from helpers less than friendly,
things all come together for the magi in their arrival at the presence of a child.
With all the gold-stamped Christmas card images
of giant geometric stars and impressive royal-robed camel riders,
it would be easy for us to conclude that this is the story of an AH HA moment—
the magi uttering *EUREKA—The Newborn King—we FOUND it!*
But that reading of Matthew's story would be superficial.
This epiphany story is complex.
It's not, in fact, the story of a single epiphany, but THREE.
And in each case the light revealed is a different kind of brightness.

- 3) **The simplest, most straightforward epiphany is one that comes—to Herod.**
Yes, King Herod does get an "epiphany" of sorts.
It gives him sudden insight that redirects his behavior.
Yet it is totally IN character with HEROD's character.
Power clenching is his game, and inflicting violence his game plan of choice.

THAT said, while always on the alert for who might be trying to take him out;
this visit of the magi must come to Herod from out of the blue.

Accompanied by prophetic words of which he was unaware,
and would surely have sneered at, had he heard them—
suddenly—magi, star, prophecies, and court theologians—
the pieces all come together, and Herod goes on instant Red Alert.

In a blinding flash, an AH HA moment,

Herod knows exactly what NEEDS to be done, and how to GET it done.

And when his epiphany doesn't take him where he wants it to,

he slaughters children not only "innocent," but who pose no threat at all to his control.

Seemingly clear epiphanies can take us, and those around us, into very dark places, indeed.

4) The magi—they are the ones we mostly think of as having an epiphany.

Like Herod, they are also predisposed to receive what comes their way.

They have long been scanning the sky for what's out of the ordinary.

And the trajectory of their journey is driven by a single focus.

Both Herod and the magi are well positioned to recognize the signs when they appear.

Once the magi come within range, however, they seem to lose the star.

How could that be? Matthew doesn't say.

But in the space the story-teller leaves, there's room for a reasonable guess.

They've been following a lone bright star against the backdrop of a night sky.

Once they arrive in Jerusalem the magi encounter other lights—

lights that distract them from the light they have been following.

One such glaring distraction could well be the stares their coming elicit from the locals.

Who are THEY, where have they COME FROM, and what are THEY doing HERE?

MAGI—ASTROLOGERS, MAGICIANS, SOOTHSAYERS, SHYSTERS,

PURVEYORS OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS NOT OUR OWN.

Rather than eliciting awe at their regal dress, or their elevated positions astride exotic beasts;

in Matthew's Infancy Narrative, these magi may well have been consigned to a social status

akin to the ill-regarded shepherds Luke describes in HIS Baby Jesus Story.

Bottom line—the magi lose their light—lose what has been given them as gift,

and they go in search of help from those they have every reason NOT to trust,

granted who Herod and his helpers are.

So, their visit to the Newborn King, while good for them, still contributes unintentionally

to the slaughter of children, and Rachel's inconsolable grief.

The epiphany of the magi is different from Herod's.

It is not darkly-intentioned, as is his—it is eventually enlightening for them;

yet, tragically, it has a share in the darkness wrought by Herod's own AH HA!

5) But there is, in Matthew's story, another epiphany—

a series of them, actually, that come to Joseph.

Like Herod and the magi, Joseph has been primed to anticipate the unusual.

He's already had one unsettling dream; but then, in succession, he gets three more.

I wager, however, that he doesn't say AH HA!

But rather, more likely: *Say WHAT! How can this BE? Why ME?*

First: *Marry this woman whose child isn't mine?*

Then: *Take them both to Egypt?*

Followed by: *Bring them home, since Herod is dead?*

And last: *Since the NEW king is "like father, like son;" change direction yet again?*

When you compare the light that dawns on Joseph with the other two epiphanies, his is the one LEAST like a EUREKA.

Joseph must receive his illumination one step at a time,

and follow each one in directions that seem both divergent and highly disorienting.

Herod's "epiphany" is a vile counterfeit, of course, with tragic consequences.

The star of the magi fosters an epiphany that for some reason they can't keep in sight.

Yet both of those, far more than Joseph's, are AH HA events.

6) In the year ahead, as he tells the Jesus story, we will hear Matthew say again and again:

THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM ON FIRST LIGHT.

Disciplined discernment is required, especially when the stakes are high.

And genuine epiphanies don't usually lead to "happily ever-afters, once and for all."

An epiphany worth following gives us just enough light to take the next step

in what are often costly journeys, not TO, but THROUGH thick darkness.

Today we begin a celebration of Epiphany—not as a day, but as a season.

And we pray for ourselves, our families, our faith community,

and especially today for our nation,

the same prayer offered by the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians:

(We) pray that God may give (us) a spirit of wisdom and revelation . . . ,

so that with the eyes of (our) heart(s) enlightened

we may (come to) know the hope to which God (is calling) us.

Grant our community, gracious God, a season of epiphany like THAT.