
Happy Epiphany!
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
January 8, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 2:1-12

Happy Epiphany! Yes, I realize that officially, Epiphany was two days ago. January 6. 12 days after Christmas. But I don't care. Happy Epiphany! But you know, it does seem strange to celebrate Epiphany. I'm still full of egg nog - vegan of course. I don't really feel like I want to celebrate anything right now. Besides, of all the events in the gospels that we might celebrate, why pick Epiphany? Hands up - how many of us would rather celebrate "Turning Water Into Wine Day"? Imagine the fun we could have celebrating that! Celebrating turning water into wine would fill the pews. Whereas I suspect that nobody came here today specifically because it is Epiphany Sunday.

I think the root of the problem is that we are Protestant. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to be Protestant. But Protestants just do not make Epiphany very exciting like Orthodox and other Catholic churches do.

[image: russian epiphany]

For example, Eastern Orthodox churches "focus heavily on Jesus' baptism at Epiphany. In Russia, Bulgaria, Greece and other countries priests toss crucifixes or crosses into the water, which devotees then dive for."¹

[image: happy customer]

Does anyone here want to jump into the Grand River right now? I'm happy to stand on the side and throw our cross in if you want to jump in and fish it out. No? OK, but it's your loss. This devotee seems to be enjoying himself.

[image: Roscon de reyes]

In other places, Epiphany is celebrated with special food. "In Spain, and other Latino countries, Jan. 6 is 'Dia de los Tres Reyes Magos,' or Day of the Three Wise Kings.

To celebrate, people make a 'roscon de reyes,' or king's ring cake, a pastry with a

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/01/05/epiphany-holiday-explained/96224336/>

tiny figurine of a baby baked into the dough.

[image: kings cake]

The idea is that the baby will be revealed [with a] bite of bread, just as Jesus was revealed as the Son of God to the kings.”²

[image: befana]

But the fun does not stop there. “In Italy, children receive gifts on Epiphany morning from a witch known as ‘La Befana.’ The story goes that the wise men visited an old woman when they were looking for Jesus and invited her to come along. She was too busy. Then the shepherds stopped at her shack and extended their invitation. [But she said] ‘Sorry, too busy!’ Since then, she flies through the air in search of the Christ child, leaving gifts for other good children in her search.

[image: gondoliers]

Meanwhile in Venice, gondoliers mark Epiphany by dressing like old women and cruising down the Grand Canal.”³

By comparison, as Protestants we want to believe that we are calm and rational. We want to believe that we are sensible. In other words, we are boring.

[image boring machine]

And Epiphany is one of those celebrations where that is really obvious when we compare our traditions with other traditions around the world. Yes, Jesus the baby is newly arrived, but we are happy to sit at home drinking tea and watching Netflix. Yes, Jesus the baby is newly arrived, but we do not feel driven to live different lives because of it. I’m a big fan of being rational, obviously. But perhaps we could become just a bit more energetic about Epiphany. And perhaps we can do that today!

[image: rise of skywalker]

But first, on a completely related note, I’m reminded of a movie. Well, almost any movie really. But I suppose I need to pick a movie that you might have actually watched prior to the pandemic. How about the latest Star Wars movie, “The Rise of Skywalker” from 2019?

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Did you enjoy it? Did you perhaps enjoy it but somewhere in the back of your mind you were disappointed because the plot was so vacuous? Were you disappointed by comparison to the movies from the Marvel universe. Because in that universe - or more properly, that multiverse - all 22 movies offer a compelling, comprehensive picture. Whereas Star Wars is still basically just an excuse for fighting with light sabres and shooting blasters? Were you disappointed because the lack of plot gave your brain lots of time to find the holes in the plot? Plot holes big enough to drive the Millennium Falcon through. Even with the hyper-drive engaged?

[image: plot holes]

The funny thing about plot holes in movies is that the people who really love a particular movie are usually the last people to see any plot holes in it. They are so in love with the story, or the characters, or the actors, or the scenery that they don't actually care if the story makes sense. And that's cool. For them the value in the story is separated from the truth of the story. That is a gift of course. To see the world with child-like eyes (at least for the length of time it takes to watch a movie). To experience without reflection. Movies are always better if you do not notice the plot holes. Because once you see a plot hole, you are reminded that you are watching a piece of fiction, not reality.

The same thing happens with any favourite story, it's not particular to movies, of course. It even happens in scripture. Take today's reading for example. By tradition, Herod is supposed to be devious, and the magi are supposed to be wise. That is how they are depicted in every single Christmas pageant after all. But that is not supported in the biblical story of the magi.

Herod the devious - who had a personal bodyguard of 2,000 soldiers - is not smart enough to have one of them tail the magi. So that Herod would know where the baby was even if the magi failed to return. Moreover, Bethlehem was a village of about 200 people. How many newborn babies would there be at any one time? Why didn't Herod just send a spy to Bethlehem and question the locals?

And the wise magi don't seem any brighter. Why did the magi talk to Herod at all since they ignored his advice anyway. If the magi had just followed the star to Bethlehem in the first place, then Herod would not have had any reason to slaughter the babies. The

magi - at the least - seem like typical men. Herod gives them directions to the baby and they completely ignore the directions they have been given and just follow their own senses. And being typical men, the magi bring gifts that have maximum flash and minimum utility. Perhaps “Wise” was a surname and not a job title.

So what is going on? Were Herod and the magi just having a bad day. Or perhaps these plot holes just remind us that we are enjoying a delightful piece of fiction.

Like all fiction, there is still a lot of truth to be gleaned from the story. Because whether the story of the magi is historical or not, it is 100% true that Matthew wanted to tell the story that way. What do we learn from that?

[image: where’s waldo]

For one thing, in Matthew, the magi come to Herod and ask, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” To you and I, that sounds like a question about geography. Namely, “Where is the child?” But Herod would have heard that question in a different way, because Herod was himself already the “King of the Jews” by Roman proclamation. Herod was declared the “King of Judea” by the Roman Senate. The question was not about geography. It was about identity. Who is the King of the Jews anyway? Herod? Or some other upstart? Who is the messiah anyway?

In point of fact, there has always been a lot of competition for the job of messiah.
[image: simon bar kokhba]

For example, during the second Jewish rebellion against Rome in 132–135 A.D. “the Jewish sage Rabbi Akiva regarded Simon as the Jewish messiah. And even gave him the surname “Bar Kokhba” meaning “Son of the Star” in Aramaic. From the Star Prophecy verse from Numbers 24:17: ‘There shall come a star out of Jacob’. . . . Rabbinical writers subsequent to Rabbi Akiva did not share [his] estimation of [Simon]”⁴. Perhaps because “both the rabbi and his ‘messiah’ were captured, tortured, and killed by the Romans.”⁵ during the revolt.

[image: modern magi 1]

Matthew was trying to say that Jesus was the messiah. But Matthew was

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_bar_Kokhba

⁵ https://www.foi.org/free_resource/wise-men-gentiles-journey-faith/

simultaneously emphasizing that Herod was not the messiah. And that is the kind of message that gets people killed. That's a very traditional reading of the text.

But I think that in this story there is another message for us - a message from Herod of all people. A message that affects us today. A message that just might make us generate some energy around Epiphany. But don't worry, you do not have to jump into the Grand River today. But you might have to do something that is more difficult.

[image: modern magi 2]

Herod is an interesting guy. On the one hand, he's the local king of Judea, which makes him the "King of the Jews", if Jews were to have a king at all. But Judea is an occupied state under Rome. So Herod has to balance the political objectives of his subjects with the requirements of Rome. Rome was - in general - a good partner to be under. Because Rome generally was more interested in profits than control. If you were shrewd, you could deal with the Romans and people on both sides would make money. Well, rich people would make money. Poor people always suffered of course. But Herod was also Jewish. Herod knew, lived, and breathed the stories and the longing for the coming messiah who would liberate the people from Roman rule. Herod would have recognized that his own power was limited. So when Herod heard about the birth of the Jewish messiah, why did he not support the project? Even if Herod thought there was only a 1% chance that Jesus was messiah, why did he not support Jesus and work to liberate the people of Judea from Roman rule? Even if only to keep tabs on the upstart. How could Herod be waiting for the messiah himself and then fail to support the messiah when he showed up? Herod had a dream - the collective dream of the Jewish people at that time. But when he had the opportunity to work for that dream, he decided to scuttle it instead, or at least do his best to scuttle it.

And how often do we do that ourselves? How often do we have a dream for our own lives, but when an opportunity comes for us to work for that dream, we don't make the effort and instead scuttle the opportunity? How often do we wait for the "perfect moment" instead of just getting to work. How often do we wait for the stars to align perfectly over Brantford before we have the epiphany that the time is now. God is here. Now. You do not get a better chance than now to embrace and live into the reality that

God is here.

[image: epiphany]

I think the problem is that we wait for “ideal conditions”, forgetting that life never works that way. The original Epiphany involved a long uncomfortable ride on smelly camels. The original Epiphany involved control freaks and murderers. And yet Jesus came into our midst anyway. The time and the place to engage with God, is right here, and right now, as it has always been. That’s what Epiphany is all about.

Besides, God does not usually show up in “ideal conditions” anyway. God usually shows up in the shadows of our lives. Born in poverty, in a stable, living life as an unemployed, homeless person - ring any bells? Jesus was never about ideal conditions. Jesus was about the presence of God right in whatever mess we find ourselves in.

Yes, of course we want our lives to be sane and orderly. But God shows up in the shadows. If you have no idea what I’m talking about, go and visit with people at Victoria Park or in hospital, or long-term care, or palliative care, or prison and you might figure it out. Epiphany should be exciting. But we won’t feel much excitement if we stay all snug and safe in our orderly lives. Fortunately, we do not have to go far to find God in our midst. But we do have to take a step in the right direction.

I would like us to close with a blessings, called “A Non-traditional Blessing”⁶ written by a Benedictine nun called Sister Ruth Marlene Fox. Please join me:

A Non-traditional Blessing

- May God bless you with discomfort... Discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, Discomfort, so that you will live deep within your heart.
- May God bless you with anger... Anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, Anger, so that you will work for justice, freedom, and peace.
- May God bless you with tears... Tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, starvation and war, Tears, so that you will reach out to comfort them And turn their pain into joy.
- And, may God bless you with foolishness... Foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, Foolishness, so that you will do what others claim

⁶ <http://www.gingerling.co.uk/the-origin-of-a-franciscan-prayer-a-non-traditional-blessing/>

cannot be done.

Happy Epiphany!

Amen.