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Happy Epiphany!  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
January 4, 2026  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 2:1-12

Happy Epiphany! Yes, I realize that officially, Epiphany is two days away. Epiphany is on January 6. 12 days after Christmas. But I still want to say it. Happy Epiphany! But you know, it does seem strange to celebrate Epiphany. I'm still full of egg nog. I don't really feel the need 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! 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."<sup>1</sup>

[image: happy customer]

Does anyone here want to jump into the Don River right now? I'm happy to stand on the side and throw a 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 'roscón de reyes,' or king's ring cake, a pastry with a tiny figurine of a baby baked into the dough.

[image: kings cake]

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

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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.”<sup>2</sup>

[image: befana]

“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, La Befana flies through the air in search of the Christ child, leaving gifts for other good children in her search.

[image: gondoliers]

And in Venice, gondoliers mark Epiphany by dressing like old women and cruising down the Grand Canal.”<sup>3</sup>

[image cat sleeping]

And what do Protestants do to celebrate Epiphany? Usually - nothing at all. We emphasize spiritual reflection rather than elaborate public festivals. We want to believe that we are calm and rational. We want to believe that we are sensible. In other words, we are boring. 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 TV. 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 enthusiastic about Epiphany. And perhaps we can do that today!

Our spring-board into that excitement is the story we have been given about the magi, and Herod. But first, on a completely related note, I’m reminded of a TV show. Specifically, Gilligan’s Island.

[image: gilligans island cast]

Gilligan’s Island was a TV show that ran from 1964-1967, but survived many years of reruns. The premise of the show is that 7 people got on a pleasure boat for a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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three-hour sightseeing cruise out of Honolulu. But they ran into a big storm and ended up marooned on a deserted island. For 3 years. Each episode detailed an attempt to escape the island, or to be rescued in some way. And each attempt was thwarted by the bumbling antics of the First Mate, Gilligan.

The story was completely unbelievable. For one thing. Think of what you would take with you on a three-hour sightseeing cruise. Perhaps a light sweater and a water bottle? And yet, the women on the show had completely different outfits every episode. As did the millionaire On a deserted island.

[image: Gilligan's island professor]

One of the passengers was a high school teacher, who they called "The Professor". He was very creative. He could make a radio out of coconuts and vines. But somehow, he just could not patch the hull of the boat.

[image: Gilligan's island rescue attempt]

The most ridiculous thing about the show is that the attempts to get rescued always almost worked. Until Gilligan fouled it up. The people could have been rescued easily in episode 2 if they had just tied Gilligan to a tree and repeated their rescue attempt from episode 1.

But nobody ever complained about how unrealistic the show was. The show did not have to make sense. The point of the show was to simply be entertained. To fall in love with the characters themselves. To laugh at the frivolous humour. The show had bigger plot holes than the actual holes in the boat. And yet, the show worked.

[image: plot holes]

The funny thing about plot holes in TV shows and movies is that the people who really love a particular show are usually the last people to see any plot holes in them. 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.

The same thing happens with many favourite stories. It even happens in scripture. Take today's reading from Matthew for example. By tradition, Herod is supposed to be devious, and the magi are supposed to be wise. But not so in our reading today.

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Herod the devious - who had a personal bodyguard of 2,000 soldiers - is not smart enough to have one of them follow 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? Herod did not need to rely on the magi at all.

And the wise magi do not seem very bright. 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 later. The magi are just typical men. The magi 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.

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 it. 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? And just to be clear, I'm not trying to rip the story apart. I just want to make space to hear what Matthew was actually trying to say. Perhaps we need to hear the story with 1st Century ears. Would that be very different?  
[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?" We hear the question as if it's a page from "Where's Waldo?" But Herod would have heard that question in a very different way. Because Herod was 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 someone else? Who is the messiah anyway?

In point of fact, there has always been a lot of competition for the title of Jewish messiah.

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[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]”<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps because “both the rabbi and his ‘messiah’ were captured, tortured, and killed by the Romans.”<sup>5</sup> during the revolt.

The title of Jewish messiah has been hotly debated for a long time. But I digress.  
[image: modern magi 1]

In today’s reading, Matthew was trying to say that Jesus was the messiah. But Matthew was simultaneously saying that Herod was not the messiah. And that is the kind of message that gets people killed.

But I think that in this story there is another message for us. A message that affects us today. A message that just might make us generate some energy around Epiphany. A message that comes from Herod. A message that is echoed in Gilligan’s Island.

[image: modern magi 2]

Herod is an interesting guy. On the one hand, he is the local king of Judea, which makes him the “King of the Jews”. If Jews were to have a king at all. But Judea was 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. Rome usually used the minimum military presence required to get what they wanted from an occupied state - money. 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 have always suffered of course.

But Herod was himself Jewish. Herod knew the stories and the longing for the

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon\\_bar\\_Kokhba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_bar_Kokhba)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.foi.org/free\\_resource/wise-men-gentiles-journey-faith/](https://www.foi.org/free_resource/wise-men-gentiles-journey-faith/)

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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 a Jewish messiah, why did he not support the project? Even if Herod thought there was only a small chance that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah, why did Herod not support Jesus and work to liberate the Jewish people from Roman rule? How could Herod be waiting for the messiah himself and then fail to support the messiah when the messiah - or at least a potential messiah - 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. Perhaps Herod wanted a messiah to come - but he did not want the consequences. Perhaps Herod wanted a messiah to come - but he did not want it to cost him his power and his position.

In Gilligan's Island, what's funny - and also a little sad - is that the castaways are never rescued not because rescue is impossible, but because Gilligan's well-intentioned actions always get in the way. It's the same thing with Herod. Herod knows the longing for a messiah. He even knows where the child is supposed to be born. The rescue is right there in front of him. But welcoming the messiah would mean letting go of control. And Herod just could not do that. So instead of being part of the rescue, Herod becomes an obstacle.

And how often do we do that ourselves? How often do we have a dream for our own lives. And instead of working for it, we become an obstacle to what we say that we want. You and I might relate to Herod - and to Gilligan - more than we probably like to admit. How often do we scuttle our own dreams?

[image: epiphany]

One thing we often tell ourselves is that we have to wait for the right moment. How often do we wait for the stars to align perfectly overhead before we have the epiphany that the time is now.

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.

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As it has always been. That is 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 often shows up in the shadows. If you have no idea what I’m talking about, go and visit with people experiencing homelessness. Visit with people in hospital, or in prison. 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 blessing, called “A Non-traditional Blessing”<sup>6</sup> written by a Benedictine nun called Sister Ruth Marlene Fox. The blessing summarizes well this sermon. And please hear this as our collective invitation into 2026. 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 cannot be done.

Happy Epiphany! And blessings on us all in 2026.

*Amen.*

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