

Overwhelmed, with Joy—Epiphany of Our Lord

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[Isaiah 60:1-6](#)

[Ephesians 3:1-12](#)

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

Today, I want to focus on just a small piece from our Gospel reading. We are observing this Sunday the feast of Epiphany—which comes officially on January 6th—so, we have a lesson from the Gospel of Matthew. Lately, we've been in the Gospel of Luke, since the beginning of Advent. But you Bible experts out there will know that the story of the Magi—of the wise men, or the “three kings” our tradition sometimes calls them—only comes in the Gospel of Matthew.

Whether there were three or 30, we don't know, but what Matthew reports is that they found the child Jesus. These astronomers, observers of natural phenomenon, maybe even proto-scientists you could say, saw an unusual star, and they interpreted this natural sign as meaning a new king for Judea had come.

Did they know what sort of king Jesus was to be—emptying himself of all power to the point of death on a cross? Did they know this was the invisible God made flesh—through whom all things were made? Again, our tradition believes that the gifts they gave Jesus allude to some kind of inkling, as we will sing in our Hymn of the Day... But I want to suggest now that their foreknowledge doesn't really matter.

They followed an unusual phenomenon—a bright, heavenly body. They interpreted the sign enough to know something important was happening amidst the powers of the world. And so, they go and talk to those powerful and conniving ones to inquire. But I'm getting far afield here—like I said at the start: I want to focus on one thing, and that is this: When the Magi saw that the star had stopped, **they were overwhelmed with joy.**

In Greek it says they rejoiced with very much—with *mega*—exceeding joy. They were gripped with delight. I don't think we are strangers to joy, *in theory*. We sang about joy in our gathering hymn. Joy is so very often a word that is printed on Christmas cards. But what is this joy?

I am suggesting today that these wise men, these scholars of the ancient world, don't quite know. What we do know is that they are far from their homeland. They have been speaking

with the king and religious experts of Judea. They have seen a great, and mysterious light in the sky. And they have chosen to follow it, they have been bidden to follow it.

We've got to assume that when they were overwhelmed with exceeding joy—especially after a long journey, that they laughed, and shouted and, maybe, probably began to cry. All for a reason they couldn't possibly have fully understood. But they let it happen.

Sometimes, I feel like in these dark days of COVID resurgences, of political turmoil, of environmental disasters and collapse, of church decline and confusion, in these days of... all the things... I wonder if we even let ourselves really feel joy anymore... I wonder if any of you felt twangs of guilt this Christmas and New Years as you celebrated. Maybe not... maybe it was fine. But maybe you did secretly ask yourself: "What is there even to be happy about?"

I can tell you that ringing in the New Year for me on Friday was bittersweet and confusing to say the least. I haven't even wrapped my head around 2020, let alone, moving into 2022. I had to ask myself, "What is there to celebrate?"

But, here, in the Gospel of Matthew, after a long journey I'm sure I can't even comprehend—here, foreigners rejoice. This is the meaning of Epiphany, of course—a shining out, I think your bulletins call it a "manifestation"—but who God is, is shining out into all the world, not just to one chosen nation, one people—God is the God of all creation, as Paul writes to the Ephesians—the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body. And as Isaiah writes—[other] Nations shall come to your light.

Not only do the wise men rejoice, but I am convinced that they are gripped with joy: excessive, very great joy. A joy that was perhaps not even *supposed* to be theirs. You will notice, that the people who are supposed to be rejoicing—all the people of Jerusalem and the king with them—are not. They are afraid—afraid of what this will mean for them.

The joy that grips the Magi, like all joy, is a very powerful thing. Joy is cracking a smile, bursting out into laughter, it is, more than anything else, a change-agent. This joy is a breaking-open—and that can be scary. Isaiah says that the light that shines on Israel—the glory and presence of God—this joy makes those who see it themselves radiant. "Then you shall see and **be radiant**; your heart shall thrill and rejoice..." The wise men have become radiant. Laughing, giving lavish gifts, kneeling down and greeting a baby like a king.

The first person I always think of when it comes to radiating joy, is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He died and joined the Church Triumphant on the day after Christmas. I'm not sure if any of you know his story:

Archbishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa, during and after apartheid. he was a man of great faith, of great passion for racial justice and forgiveness and reconciliation in his country, and a man of great joy.

In 2016 he wrote a book with the Dali Lama, actually, who was a close friend of his, about joy. In this book he says: "Discovering joy does not, I'm sorry to say... save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken."

2021 was another year of hardship, but as Archbishop Tutu says, that does not mean that we can't be opened to celebrating. In this community, though the year as been long and uncertain, there is quite a lot to celebrate and be joyful about. But it takes courage, it takes faith you could say, to even let yourself celebrate. There is always the nagging voice that says don't bother celebrating, that joy is transient, and cannot be trusted. There is also the hard reality of mental health struggles and diagnoses, too, that can make joy unreachable.

But despite these things, as the Church we believe in the power of God's joy. Because of Christ, we believe that all of creation—fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains—repeat the sounding joy. We believe that Magi, and gentiles, and all those called outsiders rejoice in Christ. And we also believe, along with Archbishop Tutu, that joy for the Christ child is not magic—it is a process of God shining into us, of our becoming radiant, year after year, of being opened by the experience of God's love for us.

And that is my New Year's prayer, or resolution or whatever: that you all would be overwhelmed, too, by this joy, this real true experience of God's own joy, little by little, here at Christ the Good Shepherd, and in your very own lives.

Amen.