

# Epiphany: Stars and Dreams

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Matthew 2: 1-12

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Many years ago, long before I could hear the message, Jesus is Lord, I was told by the actions of a congregation that “You Matter.” I would ride to the Crown of the Sea on a winter or spring Saturday morning and I would sing those songs of church. The songs stilled my soul, quieted my fear, and allowed me to hear God say...”Hey, they’re right, you do matter.” Maybe, at those times gazing upon the sunlit ocean singing the songs of faith, I felt something like what the magi felt so long ago as they knelt before Jesus, that which the gospel of Matthew describes as an overwhelming joy, the picture of Epiphany.

However, their journey, begins with a question: Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? Where shall we go?

You would have thought the star would have been enough for the wise men and indeed it is. But there is this momentary pause in Jerusalem allowing King Herod to get a whiff of what he fears most—that there would be a competitor to the throne. And it is not just Herod who is afraid. Did you hear who else is afraid in the reading?

The wise men explain that they have observed a star rising, a star which these magi who have learned the ways of astrology understand is the star of a king. It has been written in the heavens that the king of the Jews has been born.

Scripture says “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened....” I’m sure you got that part. We have no problem thinking about how a king might want to protect his own progeny, his own throne. It is easy to cast aspersions upon him. We don’t much like kings here in the United States of America anyway. But it is the second part that is hard to hear: King Herod was frightened and all Jerusalem with him.”

The question of the wise men and the rising star spread fear in Jerusalem. Fear forms the backdrop of what is to come.

Indeed the gospel of Matthew tells a dark story. Fear twists Herod’s heart into one who will try to kill the new born king by killing all the babes, those who are 2 years and under in Bethlehem. The fear that lives in all of Jerusalem will eventually kill Jesus.

When fear overcomes faith, it causes people to act in ways that strangle life and sacrifice what is holy.

Be not Afraid speak the angels in scripture. In Matthew,

however, it isn’t Mary who is greeted by an angel, but Joseph who is visited by an angel in a dream. And the word the angel speaks to Joseph is not simply “be not afraid,” but rather “do not be afraid to take Mary (the one who is already showing signs of being with child even though it clearly isn’t yours) as your wife, for the child in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Be not afraid, not simply to hear the word of God, be not afraid to act on that word for, it is true, the Holy Spirit has come into the world and started something beyond your imagining. The Holy Spirit has come and started something beyond your imagining and, guess what, you have a part in God’s movement, you matter.

You can argue on either side of whether or not Mary was a virgin. Scripture doesn’t speak in one accord and neither must we. But hear this: be not afraid to act on the faith that believes God breaks through what are the scientific boundaries of this world, seeking to set us on a journey defined by the beat of God’s own heart. Joseph acts, not with understanding of what is going on or how it could possibly be as he is told in his dream. He acts because he believes God wants him to act.

Joseph did as the angel in his dream commanded. His faith protected Mary. In the following verses, the angel will speak again to Joseph, and Joseph again acts. This time his faith protects Jesus from Herod’s killing spree.

Faith saves. Be not afraid to act on faith.

I think I just opened a can of worms. How often I have heard that phrase quoted during a church’s budgeting season. Thankfully, in our church, God selects Trustees who are a good blend of caution and faith. The Christian faith is born in reality not in the fantasy of Disney. This is not the language of “follow your dream.” But do not be afraid of what God wants you to do, whether you really do get a word from an angel or an answer to the prayer of “where do you want me to go?” I suspect Joseph was very glad he followed the word of the angels those days. And then there are the wise men, but before we talk of them, let’s pause for a more modern story.

Dale Recinella is a lay Catholic chaplain to the death row inmates in Florida. The story I want to share with you is his and it comes out of everyday family life. It reminds me that angels don’t necessarily need to only be the stuff of dreams.

Dale gave a talk about “Breaking Chains and Healing Bonds” in a conference put on by Christian Healing Ministries about the Healing and Restoration of our Families. This is how I remember him telling his story:

We decided that we would use time outs in our home after our older boy, having received a spanking, said to us “why is it not okay for me to hit my sister but it is okay for you to hit me?” My wife and I decided that certain deeds would be punished by time outs. We listed the misdeeds and hung them on the refrigerator as a reminder to all.

One evening, I received a phone call from someone in my business. He said that “word is getting around that you will not work on Sundays. Your competitors are calling potential clients and telling them that they shouldn’t choose you because you are now unavailable to them on that day.” I don’t remember swearing on the phone. But my son, when I hung up, was there to tell me that I needed quite a long time out for all the bad words I had spoken. I tried to save myself from the dreaded time out by using scripture. You need two or more witnesses I said to my son. He called into the room my wife and daughter and they, these women who have received much by my hand, they testified against me.

“So,” I said in response, “I need to have an hour time out. I’ll just go to my room and stay there by myself.” The whole family, with one voice, shouted “No way.” They knew that such a time out was exactly what I would appreciate having. Instead they sentenced me to a 3 hour time out in the living room, each one taking a turn with me, making me do whatever they wanted me to do. I remember playing dolls with my daughter. In her play my head became a stage for her doll’s antics.

As he ends his telling, Dale laughs the laugh of one remembering the joy of an unplanned moment.

I love this image of the dolls on his head. I keep expanding on it. I see dolls dancing on his head singing songs, putting on full blown musicals. I see his daughter laughing with the fun of it all, and his son and wife waiting for their turn to be with him because, you know the litany by now, he matters. What he does with the ones he loves matters. A boy’s gleeful catching his Dad red handed turns into an opportunity for joy...might I even say, an epiphany, it was a place where the holy came down and took hold of a man.

There were plenty of other ways for him to react. He is the Dad and he has a lot of power. He could have told everyone to leave him alone, gone into his room, watched a game, or gone for a run. He could have allowed fear to take over, to send him into a disconnected place or onto a battleground. He could have allowed sleep to overcome

him and dreams to take on the images of one who can’t succeed.

Instead, beyond all reason, because of an agreement, you might even say a covenant he made with his family, his daughter played dolls on his head. I’m sure if presented with that idea at the moment he hung up with his colleague, it would have seemed far from delightful. He had other things he wanted to do, demons he wanted to excise, plans to make. But Dale’s faith, his belief that his children and his wife were acting for his benefit, or at least the idea he had to obey so they would abide by the rules in the future, opened the door to an unexpected joy. And he became, for that bit of time, the object of his family’s delight.

Nowhere in the scripture is a Savior’s birth to be marked by a star or by wise men seeking to worship him from the East. The wise men signal something outside of the Jewish faith, something unexpected like dolls dancing on your head, points to the miracle, to epiphany, to the place where God and mortals meet. Just as God’s plan goes outside of human understanding when Mary shows up with child at Joseph’s door, God’s plan goes outside scriptural understanding when a star moves unlike any other stars in the heavens and wise men from the East decide to drop everything to follow it—stars and dreams.

“When the wise men had heard the king (oh what irony), they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped (twice told is this star’s stopping), they were overwhelmed with joy.” Epiphany! It is the joy that takes hold of your whole body and soul when you know you have followed God and you are where you are supposed to be. You know the door is about to open to you.

What were the first words spoken by a mortal in Matthew’s gospel? What is the first word? It is a question word... WHERE?

Where does God want you to go?

Don’t you all make plans to join Daniel in Uganda. Remember, for Dale it was his living room. In Matthew the wise men enter into a house not a manger. For me it was a church meeting in an elementary school close enough for me to get to on my bicycle. (For my friend Tedd it was a midnight service on Christmas Eve.) We are not in a competition to see who can do the most extraordinary thing because of their faith. Rather we are people who, because of our faith, are willing to let the extraordinary lead us to where we might meet God.

Let us go where the Holy Spirit might enter in...the door to which God will lead us by a star, a dream, a memory,

or a child—the place of Epiphany, where despite fear and trembling, we allow God to catch hold of us.

Happy Epiphany!

### **Matthew 2: 1-12**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.