

## FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY, YEAR C, JANUARY 5, 2025

Since the beginning of time humankind has been fascinated by stars. We know that people named them and charted their own long journeys via the stars because these early stargazers noticed patterns and consistency in their movements. Many felt the stars were part of a greater story, and that the stars had the power to influence events on earth. Even today celestial cycles drive every aspect of our daily lives.

In her bestselling book, “The Human Cosmos”, Jo Marchant writes about the innate relationship we have with the stars and how they have shaped who we are – our religious beliefs, our art, social status, power structures, scientific advances and even our biology.

She explores the ways different cultures celebrated the majesty and mysteries of the night sky and how the most awe-inspiring view you can ever see empowered them just by looking up on a clear dark night. That experience and the thoughts it has engendered have radically shaped human civilization across millennia. The cosmos is the source of our greatest creativity in art, in science and in life.

But she also explores how our relationship to the stars and planets has moved from one of awe, wonder and superstition to one where technology is king and the cosmos is now explored more through data on our screens than by the naked eye observing the natural world. She writes that in many respects being wedded to our screens has separated us from the universe that surrounds us which has caused a disconnect. We are in danger of losing our connection with the cosmos for a variety of reasons one being because of light pollution. In fact, in most countries, modern light pollution obscures much of the night sky from view. Another reason for the disconnect is a far more prevalent one which is sitting in our homes being on our devices instead of actually looking up into the night sky. Yet, she writes, we need to rediscover the full potential of the universe that we inhabit, its wonder, its effect on our health, and its potential for inspiration and revelation.

It is no coincidence that a star would be the central character in the wise men’s story. Stars were often seen as having divine qualities or cosmic power and transcendence. These ancient men saw something new in the sky that drew them into its power. We often speak of an epiphany as an AHA moment - kind of a fleeting insight or inspirational moment. But for these men it was more than a moment. It was an epiphany experience which evoked a response that called forth something from within them and moved them and took them to a new place. They were travelers on a journey who were searching and longing.

Sometimes we get so hung up on what kind of star it was or how many wise men they were or were they kings or who exactly were they that we lose the significance of the story. The star tells the story of light coming into the world in a powerful way, one that fulfilled the promises of the prophets and caught the attention of these men and provided them with a direction to go.

The power of epiphany is it’s ability to evoke a response, to call forth something from within us, to move us, to take us to a new place, and to open up our lives that we might give of ourselves. Isn’t that what we see in the wise men? They were travelers on a journey. They were searching and longing and trying to find their way in life.

However, finding one's way in life can be hard. If you ever seen the Disney movie *Moana*, the title character is attempting to restore the heart of the ocean and employs the help of the demigod Maui. After a series of events it becomes apparent that she does not know the basics of sailing, or how to use the stars above as a guide. She begs Maui, "teach me to sail," to which he replies, "it's called wayfinding, Princess." He's referring to an ancient Polynesian practice which dates back at least 3,000 years of navigating the ocean using deep knowledge and intense observation of the stars in the sky and the swells of the water. But when he continues, it's clear he means more than just a geographical orientation and nautical skill. Maui says to Moana,

"It's not just sails and knots. It's seeing where you're going in your *mind*. And knowing where you are, by knowing where you've been."

In the same way, there is more to the story of the magi finding the baby Jesus than just a simple delivery of gifts with the star as some sort of GPS. This is a story of journey and discovery that teaches us a lot about what it means to search for God in the midst of our own life experiences.

The magi provide a powerful illustration of what the journey of faith, and the journey of life, can look like when we focus our intentions and attention in the right places. Willingness, observing, action, seeking guidance, responding with gratitude, and continued openness; these sound almost like a list of new year's resolutions but they are ways to be more faithful. The magi help give us tools that can help us find our own stars to follow towards the epiphanies God has in store for us in the coming year.

In W.H. Auden's poem "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," he gives us the inner thoughts, conflicts and feelings of the familiar characters. He has the wisemen complaining about the weather, missing their dogs, etc. But what he writes about why the wisemen are following the star is quite profound. He has the first wise men saying: The reason I follow this star is to discover how to be truthful now. The second Wise Man: The reason I follow this star is to discover how to be living now. The third Wise Man says: The reason I follow the star is to discover how to be loving now. Then all three say together: The reason we follow the start is to discover how to be human.

The question – for them then and for us now – is really how much we want to be challenged by truth, love and what it means to be truly human and how much we want to seek it. Many people claim to follow their conscience but in fact they don't. They follow their comfort, keeping their conscience firmly silenced or at least constrained. They have it nicely locked up in the depth of their souls and do their best to stop it whenever it tries to get to the surface.

Auden concludes his poem by saying: "Now we must dismantle the tree, Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes and carrying them to the attic," He is speaking about a modern Christmas that is now over and done with and of the divine invitation we all receive at Christmas to restore our faith, to hold on to that glimmer of hope and belief that oftentimes gets put away with the decorations.

In his final lines he is telling us the light of Christ was not meant to be tucked back in the attic with the decorations. The love of God as it shines through Jesus was meant to take root in our souls. And it still can, if we make room in our everyday lives for Christ's light to shine in our darkness.

May this Epiphany be an opportunity for us to recognize that ultimately we are all on a journey, which takes us not far from home, but back home to God. God took on

human form and came to us as an infant child to show us how to journey home. May this Epiphany be an occasion to wonder in amazement at the Christ child who was born for us and in us so we can carry his light into the world. Amen.