

*Objects in Mirror are Closer Than They Appear*  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Karen A. Blomberg  
Epiphany Sunday – January 6, 2007  
Westminster Presbyterian Church – Alexandria, VA  
Scripture: Matthew 2:1-11

---

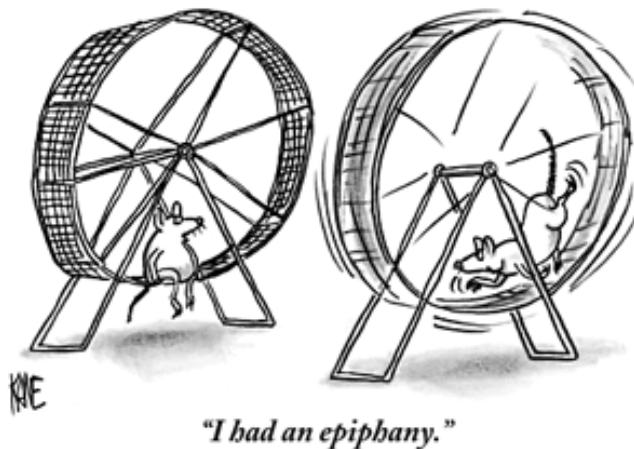
1. Introduction

The New Yorker cartoon looks like this: There are two hamster wheels, side by side. Inside the wheel on the right, the hamster is running, and of course, the wheel is spinning. The wheel next to it is still. That hamster is sitting on the inside of the wheel, watching her hamster friend run and run and run and the wheel. The seated hamster says to the other:

*I had an epiphany...*

(Only a minister or another form of church geek would google “New Yorker cartoons”, Epiphany).

© Cartoonbank.com



by john kane

Epiphany is likely one of the most under-rated liturgical days in our Presbyterian calendar. It is a significant chapter in our story as God's people. It completes the cycle of the Christmas story as the Wise Ones from the East visit the newborn king bearing gifts. It is a feast day in many Christian traditions. That word "epiphany" literally means "manifestation." Today we pay attention to what has been manifested, what is manifesting.

2

Along with this, another association with Epiphany is Light. If you have the conversation in your household about how long to leave the Christmas lights up, one argument is to leave them up and on through Epiphany which is a festival of light, celebrated on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. On Epiphany, the darkness of winter and of the world is enlightened by the Light of the star, the light of Christ, and the Light of us all.

By this light we observe what showed up for Herod, for the Wise Men. By this light of Epiphany we see and experience what is manifesting in and around us that helps us on our pilgrimage of life, and how to walk in both worlds we sometimes define as the sacred and the profane.

## II. The Epiphany Story

The Gospel story most associated with Epiphany is the one which Larry read – about the Wise Men. They were in all likelihood, not really kings, but respected astrologers and scholars from Persia who were sought out for their ability to interpret many things by the seasons and the changing stars in the sky.

You know the story. The wise men showed up in Jerusalem and started asking around “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? A star in the east has led us to this region, and we have come to worship this new king.” Herod got stirred up by the magi’s investigating this. Matthew describes Herod as being *terrified* at the news of a messiah being born nearby. Jerusalem, too, was upset by this news:

*“When Herod the King heard of this search for a messiah,  
he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him...”*

Herod then privately called a meeting of the high priests and religious scholars asking them,

*“What is this about, this messiah who is to be born around here?”*

*“The prophet is clear that this will take place in Bethlehem”* they replied.

Herod, pretending to be devout, instructed the wise men to be sure to notify him when they found the child, so that he, too, may come and worship this Messiah.

As you know, the story continues with the magi, these scholars, leaving Jerusalem for Bethlehem, guided by the wondrous star. It led them until it hovered over the place of the child. When it came time for the wise men to return to Persia, they were warned in a dream not to report back to Herod. So they figured out how to leave by another route. Quietly and unnoticed, they began their long journey home.

But as we learned last week, the story did not end there. When *Herod* learned that the wise ones had left town and had ignored his instructions, he was furious and literally flew into a murderous rage! He insured that there would be no competition for rulership of Judea by his decree that every male under the age of two years was to be murdered. No king, no messiah, nobody would arise in Bethlehem to challenge him.

This is the Epiphany story. What is manifested here? Where does the wondrous star take us in our own journey of faith? On what is the light shining for us to notice?

## III. The Realm of Mirror-dom

I want to briefly and playfully enter with you the realm of Epiphany, the story that Matthew sets up for us. It might be referred to as the realm of *mirror-dom*. As I was formulating the title for my sermon, my eyes landed on my passenger side view mirror, noticing that phrase that is on all of our passenger side mirrors, “CAUTION: Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.”

The same may be said of Scripture, and all of the characters described therein.

CAUTION: These characters in Scripture are closer to us, more like us, than they appear.

We like to sentimentalize the Wise Men, dressing them up in their royal regalia, when in actuality these scholars were probably stinky, exhausted, and not necessarily all that well-dressed when they encountered the Christ child. I imagine the scholars wearing somewhat crumpled corduroy robes with suede elbow patches sewn on. That’s the journey, isn’t it? We come as we are. The magi are mirrors for us showing us that the journey is sometimes if not often arduous, dangerous, and long. The journey of the wise men must have been anything but sentimental. They had *no idea* what or when or where they would arrive. Doubts and self-talk – “Is this just folly we have gotten ourselves into? What the heck am I doing on this journey anyway?”

CAUTION: Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.

If we dare look, Scripture as a side view mirror reflects our own behaviors and fears. We see parts of ourselves reflected that are essential for manifesting the fullness that God intends for us. *Herod* manifests how much damage occurs when decisions are made from an attitude and energy of fear. Purely and simply, Herod

heard of the Messiah's birth, and he went to a deep place of fear, as did all of Jerusalem, because fear is contagious. Herod knew that the quickest way to stir up support for his leadership was to instill fear in the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Decisions, any decisions - big, small, political, personal, religious, business decisions – Decisions based on fear will always lead to collateral damage at some level. Decisions are energetic. They have consequences. Subtly or obviously, innocent people are harmed, every time fear drives behavior.

While we may not be mass murderers like Herod, responsible for the slaughter of thousands of infants, we do make many of our decisions from places of fear.

*If I don't do this, I'm afraid I'll be punished.  
If I don't do that, I'm afraid people will think less of me.  
If I don't go along with this policy, I'm afraid I won't be able to  
keep my position of authority.  
If I rock the boat, even though I know things are not right  
in this situation, I will be the only one making waves,  
and I'm afraid of the consequences to my security.*

*"After all," we say to ourselves,  
"All things in moderation, including the Gospel.  
If I take this so called Good News too much to heart,  
I may have to alter my lifestyle, my preferences, my priorities."*

4

Before we are too quick to judge Herod, we must address our own tendencies to operate from fear of losing that which is certain and familiar. The fear of losing control. In Herod we have an archetype that is part of who each of us is, the part of us that is motivated by fear. When the shadows of our Herod nature dominate, it zaps our energy, darkening our awareness of the Light and Life around us. We lose sight of what matters.

The Matthew story invites us to look at our "Herod-ness."

What makes me afraid?  
How do I seek to manipulate situations?  
How do I clutch, hanging on to control no matter what the cost?  
How is this story from Matthew a mirror that allows me to discover just  
how close these objects, this man, Herod, is to me?

The Good News is that if we have courage to notice, courage to engage our shadow, little pieces of light begin to pierce the darkness. Those little pieces of light show up in our side view mirror.

The Matthew story also challenges us to look at our kinship with the wise men, the "outsiders", the ones from far away, the ones who are often underestimated, the foreigners, the ones outside the traditional and expected, the wise ones who know the power of worship, and of gratitude.

The convex mirror of Scripture creates a wide angle view that helps us see the many objects in our mirror that approach. Dangerous objects, loving objects, curious objects, beautiful objects, unknown objects. Our life is an adventure that contains a sometimes delightful and delicious, and sometimes detestable mix of characters, situations, and objects.

Often in our interpretation of the Wise Men story we see their pilgrimage as a sentimental journey. But the journey from Persia to Bethlehem had to have been long and arduous, as T.S. Eliot suggests in his intriguing poem "Journey of the Magi." Listen as one of the magi speaks through the power of Eliot's pen:

*It was "...the worst time of the year...  
the ways deep and the weather sharp,  
the very dead of winter...  
And the camels sorefooted, lying down in the melting snow..."*

*and the camel men cursing and grumbling and running away,  
and the night fires going out...  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
sleeping in snatches, with the voices singing in our ears, saying  
that this was all folly..."*

Until....Finally! They were there, in the right place at the right time in their right mind in their right spirit! They were in the zone. They had traversed from there to here. They were present. They were in flow. They were in the light of the wondrous star. What's it like to be in the "manger zone?" When you know you're where you're supposed to be?

5

Where we're supposed to be *isn't*.... "there." It *isn't* out yonder.  
It *isn't* in Persia, or Bethlehem, or Washington, DC.  
It *isn't* next year, or when we finally accomplish this, or when we retire,  
or when we are in the right relationship, or land the right job.

The manger zone is being fully engaged with the presence and power of God, however that may be approaching us. That's the deal.

Right where we are, the star is shining. Epiphany is our opportunity to say,

"I open myself to the light of that star. Light is shining on what I need to see. Behold, I see new things manifesting around me."

These outsiders, these scholars from the east – encountered the Christ, and they knew who they were. It was visceral. The encounter brought them to the zone of here-ness. *And they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy!* Their here-ness, their gratitude led to true worship and generosity. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped the baby, presenting their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. As they traveled back to Persia, they really weren't going back to life as usual. They weren't traveling from point A to point B. From there to there.

Scholars have tried to figure out how the wise ones changed their route to get back to Persia to avoid Herod's wrath. That may be very interesting. What's more significant, is that their "other way" back was the path of presence. They were moving from a place of here-ness to another place of here-ness. They allowed themselves to engage the Christ child whose presence was contagious. They caught "here-ness" which led them to another path. The light of Christ transforms "there" to "here"; presence happens. When we allow the power of here-ness, gratitude and generosity replaces FEAR as the basis of each decision, each action.

#### IV. Hermeneutical Transfer

What's your "another route" - the way that is more than a means from getting to point A to point B – the path that brings you authentically face to face with your shadows, your inner Herods, as well as your own inner generosity and experience of true worship.

What *different way* are you traveling –

How are we traversing the here-ness from which emerges that Presence which brings us home to who we are created to be.

What and who is manifesting in your sideview passenger mirror?

What is following you?

What situation is happening?

What circumstances?

What is causing you to experience the situation as fearful?

What would you need to tap into if you released that fear?

When we are bold to notice this in our mirror, we begin to have a spectacular view, a multitude of epiphanies arrive. To mix the metaphors a bit, when we allow ourselves to at least occasionally stop and sit quietly on the hamster wheel, we see that the “objects” are really little pieces of light, the cumulative effect of which encourages us along the way, lights our path, dispels our fears.

6

The Wise Men teach us to be wise,  
and brave enough to not only glance, but to behold  
what a full array of objects are in our mirror  
bringing us messages of light, in whatever form.

When we risk being wise in this way, we open to this Light that we celebrate today. And we don't need to be afraid anymore. Our energy is freed for worship and generosity. Hafiz, a Sufi poet from many centuries ago said it like this:

*How did the rose  
Ever open its heart  
And give to this world  
All its beauty?  
It felt the encouragement of light  
Against its being,  
Otherwise, We all remain  
Too frightened.*

Bread and cup sustain us in all of our traversing between there and there, and here and there. The Bread of Life and cup of salvation nourish us for the here-ness of God, and of each other.

What's in front of us  
and what is behind us is  
Christ's living presence  
which greets us here, now.

Happy Epiphany. Arise! Shine!  
May the radiance of Christ's heart illumine you.  
May the nearness and “here-ness” of Christ  
be always in your knowing.  
May you feel the light of the encouragement  
against your being as God approaches, in many disguises.

God is closer than we think.  
Immanuel. God with us. AND SO IT IS. AMEN.