



January 6, 2011

Lectionary readings: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-23; Matthew 2:1-12

**Epiphany: A New Kind of Journey**  
Ruth Haley Barton

*“Christians of the future will either be mystics or they will not be.”* Karl Rahner

Today is the feast of the Epiphany—the day when the Church commemorates the journey of the wise men to seek the Christ child. On this day we celebrate their arrival at the manger with longing in their hearts and gifts appropriate for the One who would be our king, our priest, and our Savior.

Epiphany is the culminating event of the Christmas season in which we celebrate the “showing forth” of God’s presence to unlikely people in unlikely places. In yet another strange twist to the Christmas story, it was pagan astrologers who were among the first and most venerated visitors to the manger. Although theirs was an occupation that was expressly forbidden in Jewish law (it was the modern-day equivalent of those who read and interpret horoscopes), they were welcomed and their gifts were received!

**A Spirituality of Imperfection**

One of the most striking elements of the Christmas story is its imperfection by any kind of human standard. None of the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth were

ideal. Mary's baby was born out of wedlock. When it was time for Jesus to be born, Mary and Joseph were on the road due to political forces that were beyond their control. There was no good place to have the baby and so they ended up in a dirty stable for this blessed event.

Beyond these intimate imperfections, the outer landscape was very bleak. Jesus was born into a time of political and religious upheaval. King Herod, an insecure and violent man, was in power at the time creating a very dangerous environment for anyone who threatened him. The wise men, for all of their "wisdom", were actually more of a hindrance than a help in the whole situation: they tipped off Herod to the fact that there was a potential usurper being born in Bethlehem. This knowledge sent Herod into a jealous rage which caused him to order what is now known as "the slaughter of the innocents"—the murder of all male children two years and under.

These were dangerous times and none of the major players in the Christmas story had any control over any of it. It was not a safe environment for spiritual seeking nor was it a good time for ushering in a new spiritual reality in the guise of a vulnerable baby. But Jesus was born anyway. And the wise men left their home country and travelled through dangerous territories to seek this One who offered them hope.

### **Seek and You Shall Find**

None of us does our seeking perfectly—least of all these wise men. But for all of their bumbling, the story of the wise men is about a longing for God that cannot be quelled, no matter who we think we are. Apparently the wise men had reached the limits of human wisdom to truly satisfy the longing of the human heart. In the midst of

whatever knowledge they had achieved, there was a poverty of spirit that could only be satisfied through a fresh encounter with Christ. Their longing propelled them to move beyond the boundaries of their previous existence in order to discover a deeper spiritual reality.

The story of the wise men is really a story of spiritual pilgrimage. It is about being willing to leave that which is familiar in order to arrive at our deeper spiritual home. It is about seeking something that we don't fully understand until we stumble upon it where we least expect it and coming home changed. If we are at all awake during this season of new beginnings, we might we sense ourselves being invited to a new journey of our own—a journey that in some way involves leaving familiar territory in order to seek and find new ways to open ourselves to God's presence even (and perhaps most especially) when we feel that our circumstances won't allow for it.

### **Through Many Dangers, Toils, and Snares**

But this journey put all the major players in the Christmas story in danger. They discovered, as we all must, that the only way to safely traverse such dangerous territory is to follow the guidance that is given—whether it comes from an unusual star, a friendly angel, a pertinent dream or an inexplicable longing. Those who fared best in the unfolding of the greatest story ever told were those who responded immediately to whatever guidance they received. In order to “get with the program” of what God was doing Mary, Joseph, Zachariah, Elizabeth, the shepherds and the wise men all responded to phenomena that were outside the norm.

This brings us to a most interesting point of learning and it is this: *all the major players in the Christmas story were mystics!* They were those who were open and responsive to the mystery of God in Christ and the revelation of the mystery of how God was choosing to be at work in the world. They were completely given over to God's mysterious ways which are completely beyond our human understanding and can only be perceived through spiritual revelation. (Ephesians 3:1-12) Many of us have a stereotypical view of what it means to be a mystic. We think it refers primarily to the experience of ecstatic union that only a few rarefied (and very weird!) saints achieve. This is a very limited view. The truth is that mystics are those who *really believe* what the rest of us say we believe—that God is real, that God is mystery (that is, totally beyond our human comprehension), that God can be encountered in the depths of our being, and that our human lives can be radically oriented and responsive to the One who is always present with us.

Mystics are those who are open to actual encounters with God that are often unmediated by religious trappings. Furthermore, these encounters are often given to those who are on the fringes of institutional structures while at the same time they are radically committed to what is truest about our faith. Mystics are those who have a longing for God that is so profound that they make radical choices to seek God and respond to God's leading in their lives.

Theologian Michael Downey writes in his book *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, "The spiritual life and especially its expression in mystical experience, is not so much a matter of striving for heights of mystical union between the soul and God who is utterly different from us. It is rather more a matter of attending to God's presence with

us and responding to God's presence by being altogether present to the divine presence which is always near. The long history of Christian spirituality has to do with the various ways of responding to God's presence and participating ever more fully in the divine life altogether present in human life, history, the world and the church."

Amen and amen! This is the journey I want to be on in 2011—the journey of learning how to be ever more present and responsive to the divine presence even when that Presence moves and moves ME in mysterious ways. Like those wise travelers who bumbled along and finally arrived—imperfectly but altogether present to the presence of God in their moment of human history—I, too, want to be a part of that long history of Christian seekers who participate ever more fully in the Divine life as it expresses itself in this moment of our human history. A moment that is imperfect and pregnant with possibility all at the same time!

*We thought we knew where to find you;  
we hardly needed a star to guide the way,  
just perseverance and common sense;  
why do you hide yourself away from the powerful  
and join the refugees and outcasts,  
calling us to follow you there?*

***Wise God, give us wisdom.***

*We thought we had laid you safe in the manger;  
we wrapped you in the thickest sentiment we could find,  
and stressed how long ago you came to us;  
why do you break upon us in our daily life  
with messages of peace and goodwill,  
demanding that we do something about it?*

***Just and righteous God, give us justice and righteousness.***

*So where else would we expect to find you  
but in the ordinary place with the faithful people,  
turning the world to your purpose through them.  
Bring us to that manger, to that true rejoicing,*

*which will make wisdom, justice, and righteousness alive  
in us.<sup>1</sup>*

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephan Orchard, *All Glorious Names* (United Reformed Church Prayer Book, London, 1989)

Print off the Scriptures for Epiphany (or find them in your Bible) so you can settle into a place that is conducive to quiet reading and reflection. *Read all four passages slowly and reflectively*, not primarily to gain information or analyze the texts, but to let the readings for today just wash over you. Allow for a few moments of silence after each passage. Notice the theme (or themes) that emerge for you and notice how they speak to your life as it is right now. Note in particular the many reference to mystery (which shares the same root as the word “mysticism”) in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and also the mysterious or mystical elements in the journey of the wise men. How comfortable are you with mystery as it relates to your own faith journey? What is the new kind of journey God is calling you to in the New Year?

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The lectionary schedule is taken from the Revised Common Lectionary Cycle A; Scriptures are quote from the New Revised Standard Version.

## **Epiphany**

### **Isaiah 60:1-6**

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

### **Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14**

1 Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.

2 May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor

with justice.

3 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

5 May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

7 In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

11 May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

12 For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.

13 He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.

14 From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

### **Ephesians 3:1-12**

1 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5 In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. 8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the

news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

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

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 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." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 '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.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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." 9 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

