

# LIFT UP YOUR EYES

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**ISAIAH 60:1-6; MATTHEW 2:1-12**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**JANUARY 3, 2016/SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS/EPIPHANY**

Today is Epiphany Sunday, a day in which the church has historically commemorated the visit of the Magi to Jesus (in the Western tradition) and the baptism of Jesus (in the East).

Actually, Epiphany doesn't arrive until Wednesday, the twelfth day after Christmas. But many churches choose the closest Sunday to Epiphany to actually recognize it.

This is what we will do today.

When we hear the word "epiphany," we tend to think of a "moment of sudden revelation." Perhaps we think of a flash of insight that all of a sudden "comes to us," whether this is a good idea, or a piece of information that I had forgotten, or whatever.

But in Scripture, "epiphany" refers to God's self-disclosure.

It is something that human beings are *shown*, rather than something that occurs to us in a moment of inspiration.

Because Christmas isn't technically over until Wednesday, we've left our Christmas nativity display up for one last Sunday.

We will spend one more Sunday with these characters that many of us know so well. Or at least that we *think* we know so well.

What I want to do this morning is to look a bit more closely at the figures in the scene behind me. I'd like to imaginatively try to see things from their eyes.

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What was their response to God's divine disclosure? How did they receive their "epiphanies?"

And I'd like for us to try to locate ourselves in these diverse sets of hopes and fears and longings and questions and expectations as we set out into 2016.

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#### Mary

- Mary was quite likely a teenager
- She is initially "greatly troubled" by the angel's visit" (Luke 1:29)
- She Confused – after a long description of who her child would be, Mary's chief concern is, understandably, how any of this is supposed to happen, given that she is a virgin!
- *I am the Lord's servant... May it be to me according to your word.*

#### Joseph

- a young man thrust into the middle of a scandal that he would never have wanted!
- I imagine Joseph to be a relatively uncomplicated young man who had pretty ordinary ambitions in life—get married, have a family, work in the family business in a small town
- And all of a sudden he finds himself in what would have been an extraordinary story and an excruciating choice: 1) stay with his pregnant fiancé who would now be the subject of all kinds of wagging tongues; 2) cut his losses and run (which would have been understandable, even expected)
- But he was a "righteous" man and so he stuck with Mary, even though it would undoubtedly make things more difficult for him
- Joseph becomes the adoptive father of Jesus

#### Shepherds

- We're not told much about them
- These are people who kind of just happened to be lingering about the place when God showed up!
- They would have been poor, not highly esteemed, not the sorts of "first witnesses" anyone would really choose to herald the arrival of a king!
- They were curious!

I want to pause, briefly, to make one simple observation. What we have here so far is a profoundly unimpressive and un-kingly scene. This is not how important rulers arrive on the scene.

Even in our day, we often hear rhetoric about how, in a democracy, “anyone” can become president or prime minister. But it sure helps if you come from a family with a lot of money and influence, doesn’t it? Even in our day, “kings” tend to have similar stories. They come from wealth and power and status.

Our familiarity with the story of Jesus’ arrival must never blind us to just how *unlikely* and unexpected the story would have been.

A “king” arriving in the womb of an unwed teenage mother at the center of a scandal... in a small town far from the halls of power in Jerusalem... in a feed trough surrounded by lowly shepherds...

If we add to this unlikely story the fact that the boy Jesus would soon be a refugee, fleeing from a murderous tyrant Herod, the picture becomes even more remarkable.

As far as epiphanies go, this one seems a little on the strange side!

And then, finally, we have the Magi, the last to arrive on the scene, the subjects of our gospel reading this morning, the focus of Epiphany.

Most Christmas manger scenes have the magi together with the shepherds and Mary and Joseph in one glorious night under a glorious star.

Alas, this probably isn’t how it happened.

- There were probably not three Magi (likely more) – three has been inferred from the number of gifts given, but Matthew doesn’t explicitly say
- They were probably not “kings” but astrologers who studied the heavens for portents of significant events (“kings” comes out of the Isaiah text)
- Probably didn’t arrive until months or years after Jesus’ birth — this is inferred from Herod’s terrible decree to slaughter all the male children two and under in a maniacal reaction to the perceived threat to his throne that the wise men’s question represented

But, arrive they eventually did. And they arrived in response to... to what? What did they hope to see? Why had they come? What was their response?

They had come to see a king, but what did that mean? Were they expecting a regal monarch? Were they expecting scenes of opulence and feverish attendants doting on a young woman of royal blood?

Were they expecting pomp and ceremony in anticipation of a king much like every other king that the world has known before and since—kings who rule with power and wealth and military might?

Matthew doesn't tell us. He simply says that when they came to the house and saw the child, they brought their gifts and bowed down and worshiped.

The first people Scripture explicitly records as "worshiping" the king of the Jews are Gentiles.

Which, again, is not exactly what we would expect.

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I think it's worth noting that in each case above, there is an element of open-mouthed, jaw-on-the-floor surprise involved in being participants in these moments of divine disclosure, these epiphanies.

Each character in this scene was, in their own way, startled into participation in the story God was telling and would continue to tell in Jesus. Often, there was initial fear that was followed by greater confidence and joy.

I think that we can also safely say that whether it is the frightened response of a teenage girl, or the righteous devotion of a young man determined to walk with his fiancé through scandal, or a group low-class shepherds who got the surprise of their lives in a field one night, or a group of Gentile astrologers from far-off lands who arrived a few years later, *none* of the characters in this nativity scene knew much about what this king would be like.

It's easy to assume that each of these characters had a full-formed conception of who Jesus would be and what he would do. But they probably didn't.

I doubt any of these characters envisioned a life of conflict with Israel's political and religious elites. I doubt any anticipated the life of a poor wandering nomad who was called the "friend of sinners" and who upended all kinds of expectations about who God is and what God wants from his people.

I doubt any saw a cross and an empty tomb on this baby's horizon.

In Luke 2:34-35, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple and after declaring that their child would be a light to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel, Simeon adds these ominous words:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

And so he would.

This definitive instance of God's "self-disclosure" would be a king like no other, a king that no one expected, a king that, in many cases, few really wanted, when it came right down to it.

This king *would* cause the falling and rising of many in Israel—but it would be the lofty that fell and the lowly that were lifted up.

This king *would* lay bare the inner thoughts of women and men, exposing their sin and selfishness, laying bare their hopes and fears, and, in the end, meeting them at the deepest point of their need.

This king still does all these things.

This king still startles us with the manner of his coming, just as he did back then.

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Wherever you find yourself in these characters—or even if you don't recognize yourself in *any* of them—can I encourage us, as we make our way out of the Christmas season and head into a New Year, to hold two related commands before us?

**First, *lift up your eyes.***

Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah tells his people to “lift up their eyes for their light has come.”

If we keep our eyes fixed down below, it will not be hard to see the “darkness that covers the earth.”

We will see war and chaos and faithlessness and sin and suffering. We will see people we love growing sick and nearing their ends. We will see relationships floundering. We will see dysfunction and greed and petty selfishness. We will see obstacles that have tripped us up in the past. We will see the faithlessness that is always so much easier than joyful discipleship.

It has never been hard to see the darkness that covers the earth.

But if we keep our eyes on these things, it will be easy to miss the surprising and exhilarating and unexpected ways that God shows up in the story. We will miss stories of peace and justice and reconciliation. We will miss opportunities for selflessness and generosity.

We will fail to notice that we are invited at every turn into a story of love.

Part of what it means to be a person of faith, I am convinced, is to be open to surprise. It is to be open to God speaking through the most unlikely people in the most unlikely ways.

It is to be open to being steered off course occasionally, like the shepherds.

It is to be open to seeking and inquiring and finding, whether we know exactly what we’re looking for or not, like the magi.

It is to be open to having our lives turned upside down like Mary and Joseph.

It is to be open to having all of our assumptions and expectations about God upended and recalibrated by Jesus of Nazareth.

**It is to be open to joy. Because good news has entered the world! Because God so loved the world and so loves it still!**

As 2016 begins, are we open to these things? *Truly* open? Or do we expect the same old same old for another year.

Will we keep our eyes fixed on the familiar or will we lift them up to the light that has come and the life that God is always holding before us?

There is another command that I want to leave with us this morning.

Earlier, I said that we were going to look at the story through the eyes of each of the characters in this nativity display. Perhaps you noticed that I left one out.

(Well, two, technically, but I don't have enough imagination to look at things from the sheep's perspective! 😊)

What about the angel?

In reading through the birth stories of Jesus in Matthew and Luke this week, I noticed that the angel repeats himself a lot.

***Do not be afraid.***

The angel says this first to Zechariah at the announcement that Elizabeth would become pregnant in her old age with John the Baptist (Luke 1: 13)...

And then to Mary when she is told that she will be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:30)...

And then to Joseph when he is told what's going on with Mary (Matthew 1:20)...

And then to the shepherds when their evening chores are disrupted by the heavenly host (Luke 2:10)!

Human beings have never been very good at this "be not afraid" business, have we?

We are naturally afraid of what we can't predict, can't manage, can't control. And fear is our instinctive response when God shows up to startle us and disrupt our plans, even to announce good news.

And yet... God's first response is very often to say, "Do not be afraid"

I am convinced that these four words are some of God's best words to his people throughout history, and right down to the present.

Perhaps these are words that you need to hear as a new year begins.

2016 will likely hold many good things for you, for us. It will hold things which will quite naturally and easily call forth responses of gratitude and praise to God.

It will undoubtedly also hold some hard things. Things that we do not want and did not expect. People and circumstances and trials that ask things of us that we don't think we are capable of.

We will have a choice, at these moments. We can respond with the anxiety and fear that come so naturally to us. We can give the dark things in our world and in our lives power over us.

Or, we can try, even if in small ways, even in halting and lurching steps, to lift up our eyes. To not be afraid.

To trust that we follow a God who has always been in the business of surprising his people with unexpectedly good news.

Like each of the characters in our nativity scene demonstrate in their own ways, we can lift up our eyes and follow the star, follow the child, follow the light and the life wherever it leads.

Because we are convinced that the One we are following is faithful and can be trusted.

May God help us to lift up our eyes in 2016.

Amen.

