

Study Guide for January 7, 2018

Theme: Epiphany “God is the love that moves the stars.” – Dante

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

This week the churches celebrate two profound events in Christian faith: The Epiphany of our Lord and the Baptism of the Lord. Our focus will be on the great “Aha” moment when the Magi who journeyed from the east discover at the end of their quest not a king born in a palace, but the infant Jesus born in a stable.

The word ‘epiphany’ often means any insightful or dramatic moment that instills new spiritual insight, vision or perspective. For Christians, it refers particularly to the manifest of Christ to the Gentiles such as it was revealed to the Magi in Matthew’s gospel reading.

Many believe the Magi are astrologers, men who watch the heavens for signs of momentous earthly events. They were not merely astronomers who study the stars and planets for scientific data, but also astrologers, not unlike people who create horoscopes today. (*Fun fact: Astrology was a forbidden means of divination for the Jews.*) Through Matthew’s gospel, we learn that the Magi sense an air of expectation that so palpable that anyone with eyes could see something momentous was about to happen. God was up to something big.

But let’s not take the Bible as our only source of this information. Other sources around the time of Jesus’ birth (sometime around 4 BCE) made similar recordings.

- Seven years before Jesus’ birth, Halley’s Comet made its circuit through our skies.
- Three years before Jesus’ birth, Jupiter and Saturn were in alignment three times. (*Fun fact: The planet Jupiter signified a king while Saturn was routinely associated with the Jews, adding to Herod’s insecurity and local political and religious speculation...like today?*)
- A year before Jesus’ birth, Chinese astronomers recorded sighting a supernova, a bright light suddenly appearing in the night sky.

What all of this tells us is that, independent of the Bible, we can read of a relatively common expectation at the turn of the era that momentous change was coming. Furthermore, as Isaiah’s prophecy records, that change would be revealed with signs in the heavens.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has always taught that God can be known through creation (Romans 1:20), a *natural revelation*. But to know God fully, God reveals God’s self through *divine revelations*. These include scripture, dreams, visions, and of course in human form.

God will do whatever it takes to get people’s attention. Thus it’s up to us to remain present with God so that our hearts and eyes are always open to receive God’s revelation. And like the magi, we must be ready to respond to God’s guidance when called to do so. It’s in these moments of spiritual alertness we discover our own special epiphanies.

Read: Isaiah 60:1-6

In a time of despair and discouragement, the prophet of Third Isaiah offers us more encouragement and hope; a vision so glorious and compelling that anyone who trusts in the Lord will be inspired and motivated to work hard (at rebuilding the Temple and people) to bring the Kingdom of God into being. Matthew uses the Isaiah text skillfully to make the connection between the prophecy of the Messiah and his coming.

Q: How is God speaking to you in this passage?

Q: What similarities do you see in Isaiah's prophecy and the story of the Magi?

Read: Ephesians 3:1-12

According to God's grace, God wants to be known in order to reconcile and redeem humanity and the rest of creation. God does this through revelations. The greatest being God's redemptive revelation in Christ Jesus, *"in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him."*

Q: How does Paul speak of God's revelations that have been given to us?

Q: How does God use this passage to speak to you?

Read: Matthew 1:18 - 2:23

It's been said that the story of the magi is a drama in five acts. Act 1 (Mt. 1:18-25) describes Joseph's dream. Act 2 (2:1-12) the visit of the magi and the actions of Herod. Act 3 (2:13-15) God warns Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt for safety (ironic twist). Act 4 (2:16-18) the slaughter of the innocents by Herod. Act 5 (2:19-23) has God using another dream to return Joseph to Nazareth. The main character is Joseph. The secondary players are the Magi. And Herod of course, is the antagonist.

Q: What is God revealing to you in this passage?

Q: In what ways do you see God in nature, in visions or dreams, and in human form?

Slow read Psalm 72 and as you do, keep Jesus in mind. Try to picture yourself standing or kneeling before his royal throne. **How is God using this passage to speak to you today?**

Prayer: Awaken my heart, O Lord, and reveal to me your dreams and desires. Fill me with your Holy Spirit so that I may not only see, but always proclaim, the glory of Christ Jesus in all that I set out to do, Amen.