

**BET YOUR LIFE?  
THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY  
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BECKY ROBBINS-PENNIMAN  
CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, DUNEDIN, FL

Have you ever played that game where you look for shapes in the clouds?  
A dog? an elephant? Sheep? Sheep are almost too easy.



Those of you who have lived here a long time may remember that there was an office building at Drew and US19 in Clearwater in which folks – tens of thousands of them - saw an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe



in the window reflection, until vandals destroyed the window panes in 2003. We all do it to some degree – we look at what's happening in our environment and we ascribe meaning to things we see, from tea leaves and Tarot cards to windows to seemingly random encounters with others. I'm not in any way poking fun, by the way. I do it all the time. Human beings search for meaning in events, objects, the skies, even food.

My mother calls such coincidences "God-incidences."  
A fellow from Pennsylvania was driving to the Keys to retire when he heard about the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the window.



He took a detour to see it, and retired in Clearwater instead.<sup>1</sup>  
So, imagine the magi. The word "magi" comes straight from the Greek, it's untranslated, like "angel" or "baptism."

It's where we get the word "magician." They weren't kings!  
The text never calls them kings. That idea comes from our other readings, Isaiah and the psalm, where it says kings will come with gold and incense as tribute to the King of the Jews. I have no problem with that image; but just because kings will come doesn't mean magi didn't.  
Back in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, magi were experts, people who made a living looking for signs, finding meaning in the stars, the weather, in dreams. sort of like Christian pastors who pronounce, after some natural disaster, that God was punishing a location because the people were wicked.  
We are a meaning-making species.

<sup>1</sup> <http://visionsofjesuschrist.com/weeping286.htm>

Today's Collect and Scripture readings are at the end of the sermon text.

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The magi were doing their job, looking at the stars, and they saw a wonder: a star they had never seen before appeared, which, in their world, meant something important had happened.

Who knows what resources they consulted, but from them, they had an insight, and epiphany, if you will, that the star's meaning was that the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews had appeared.<sup>2</sup>

Messiah, in Hebrew, means "anointed one."

The word for "anointed one" in Greek is "Christ."

At the time in history Jesus was born, the Jews assumed that their Messiah would be a king like David – mighty in battle and after God's own heart.

So, "King of the Jews" and "Messiah" or "Christ" would all be synonyms.

So, all that's fine. But why on earth would the Magi leave Persia?

(Modern-day Iran and Iraq.) They weren't Jewish.

In fact, Persia had conquered Israel more than once.

"Magi" is a Persian word.

The Magi were foreigners, gentiles, and obviously people of some means.

Not only were the gifts expensive, but so was travel.

To go on a journey of 700 or so miles back then

would have involved a lot of preparation and taken about a month.

It was also dangerous. Their Empire and the Roman Empire were in conflict.

The routes were plagued by robbers.

We don't know exactly why their epiphany compelled them to leave.

yet these magi set out on a dangerous journey with only a general notion

of where they were going, or even what they were looking for,

and no guarantee that they would ever return.

They trusted their epiphany, bet their lives on it, and went.

Would you do that?

What kind of epiphany would it take for you to pick up, leave the security of your familiar, controlled, understandable world, and go look for something that is beyond what you know now?

I got to thinking about people who have done just that.

Every seafaring explorer has done it, from the Vikings to Magellan to Thor on the *Kon Tiki*.

They had epiphanies – insights – that there were other lands, a round earth covered with seas, and connections between far-flung cultures.

They bet their lives on these epiphanies, and they went.

Every one of these journeys were dangerous; many didn't make it.

Yet, weren't they like the Magi?

The Puritans, when they got on the *Mayflower*,

and the some 400,000 pioneers who traversed America on the Oregon Trail,

had the epiphany that a home with religious freedom

could be found in a far off land;

All these people trusted their insight, bet their lives on it, and went.

Their journeys were perilous; tens of thousands died trying.

Yet, weren't they like the Magi?



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/2004/12/who-were-the-magi.aspx>

That was all hundreds of years ago. What about now?

Capt. Kirk said the space is the final frontier; we're just at the beginning of that kind of exploration.

How about those who join the military? They often have no idea where they'll end up,

but they trust the epiphany that freedom is worth fighting for, bet their lives on it, and go.

Peace Corps workers, missionaries, and aid workers

have had the epiphany that waging peace is just as powerful as waging war,

they bet their lives on it, and go.

Every one of these journeys are dangerous; many don't make it.

Aren't they like the Magi?

And what about us?

Most of us won't be astronauts, soldiers or aid workers.

Can WE be like the Magi? Can we have an epiphany, bet our lives on it, and go?

Not all journeys need to be a faraway land.

Indeed, a journey can be more like coming home,

becoming who you were created to be.

As I said last week, today is the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination as a priest.

THE question I get asked the most is how I went from being an attorney to being a priest.

How I did it was that I had an epiphany, I bet my life on it, and I went.

My epiphany began in a dark theater watching *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

I won't flog that story again; I'll tell you the whole story over a cup of coffee.

Suffice it to say that that night, in my bathroom, in a flannel nightie,

I went from being a happy little agnostic

(who went to church, by the way; they aren't mutually exclusive)

to knowing, in the core of my soul,

that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the risen Lord of Creation.

Everything became different after that, because I was different.

Church, work, family, it was all different.

I was happy about the new depth of my faith, but for several years

I was unmoored, I'd lost my footing, I didn't know how to BE any more.

Clearly, my epiphany of faith wasn't the end of anything.

It was the beginning. I had to bet my life and go.

A priest that suggested take seminary classes,

and while I was there, I discerned the call to ordination.

I doubled down on the bet, gave up my license to practice law,

and journeyed onward, even though I didn't know exactly where I was going,

or what I was looking for. I just kept following my star, as it were.

Like the magi, I've been filled with joy in where I've been led.

You'll need to buy me a second cup of coffee to hear all that.

That first epiphany in the bathroom was THE big one,

but I've had others, smaller ones, and all part of one journey of faith.

Some of the journey involved literally travelling, coming to Florida in 2002,

but most of the journey has been about becoming, very gradually,

who I was created to be: a woman learning to live authentically and joyfully,

with Jesus as my Way, my Truth, my Life.

Anyone can go on this journey.

Back to the original magi: as I said, they were magicians, alchemists.

The Hebrew scriptures take a very dim view of the magi's brand of learning, condemning sorcery and astrology.

Yet, their epiphany, that the King of the Jews had been born, was given to them in the context of their own learning and beliefs;

God met them where they were, gave them insights in terms they were experts at, signs so compellingly that they bet their lives and went.

These foreigners are the first in the Gospel to call Jesus the King of the Jews, the Christ who didn't come to fight, but to serve, to rule all people with fairness, humility and self-giving, justice, and care of the poor.

So, what kind of epiphany would it take for you to pick up, leave the security of your familiar, controlled, understandable world, and go look for something that is beyond what you know now?

If I brought you a star, would you follow it?

To put my lawyer hat back on for a minute, that's a leading question.

We have plans for this season for a spiritual renewal program for everyone.

We sent a letter out Friday, and you'll hear more about it soon.

Please take our presentation of the RenewalWorks program seriously, as seriously as the magi took the star.

You just may have an epiphany worth betting your life on.

So, what about the hats?<sup>3</sup>

Your hats – or lack thereof – are all very personal to you in some way.

They tell us about you, what kinds of things you do, teams you like, your fashion sense - or lack thereof.

Whoever you are, whatever you are, God will meet you where you are.

You don't have to be wise or powerful or know what you're looking for.

All you need to get started is to look up, see what's around you, and be open to an epiphany or two.

The worst that can happen is nothing.

The best that can happen is that you'll find out, on a personal level, why Jesus' hat is, quite rightfully, a crown.

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#### **COLLECT OF THE DAY**

O God, on this day you revealed your Son to the nations by the leading of a star. Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives, and bring us at last to the full vision of your glory, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

#### **ISAIAH 60:1–6**

Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the Lord's glory has shone upon you. Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the Lord will shine upon you; God's glory will appear over you. Nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning radiance. Lift up your eyes and look all around: they are all gathered; they have come to you. Your sons will come from far away, and your daughters on caregivers' hips. Then you will see and be radiant; your heart will tremble and open wide, because the sea's abundance will be turned over to you; the nations' wealth will come to you. Countless camels will cover your land, young camels from Midian and Ephah. They will all come from Sheba, carrying gold and incense, proclaiming the Lord's praises.

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<sup>3</sup> I had invited everyone to wear a hat this day – any hat! A sports team hat, a hat they didn't get to wear very often, anything.

**PSALM 72:1–7, 10–14**

Give the King your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the King's son;

**That he may rule your people righteously and the poor with justice.**

That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people, and the little hills bring righteousness.

**He shall defend the needy among the people; he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.**

He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, from one generation to another.

**He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, like showers that water the earth.**

In his time shall the righteous flourish; there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.

**The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.**

All kings shall bow down before him, and all the nations do him service.

**For he shall deliver the poor who cries out in distress, and the oppressed who has no helper.**

He shall have pity on the lowly and poor; he shall preserve the lives of the needy.

**He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, and dear shall their blood be in his sight.**

**1 PETER 5:2–6**

Like shepherds, tend the flock of God among you. Watch over it. Don't shepherd because you must, but do it voluntarily for God. Don't shepherd greedily, but do it eagerly. Don't shepherd by ruling over those entrusted to your care, but become examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive an unfading crown of glory.

In the same way, I urge you who are younger: accept the authority of the elders. And everyone, clothe yourselves with humility toward each other. God stands against the proud, but he gives favor to the humble.

Therefore, humble yourselves under God's power so that he may raise you up in the last day.

**MATTHEW 2:1–12**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,  
because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

**SERMON HYMN:** *O Jesus, Crowned with All Renown*