

Epiphany January 4, 2026 Greenwich

A woman theologian has suggested that if these had been three wise women, they would have shown up on time, helped clean up the stable, and given practical gifts like diapers and onesies, all nicely wrapped,

I'll leave that to you to ponder.

The gospel story we heard is full of fantastic details, worthy of a Spielberg or Lucas film: exotic stargazers from the fabled East, celestial phenomena, ancient esoteric texts of prophecy, a king and his court, wonderous gifts worthy of a potentate, angels and dreams.

What do they all mean? What did these signs mean to Matthew and his church community as they pondered the person and ministry of Jesus?

And what do they mean to us now, twenty-one centuries later, as we seek to remember and proclaim Jesus Christ faithfully, and bear his name and shine with his light?

The image that dominates Epiphany, the one which captures the imagination of Christian hymnists and poets and artists, is the Star.

Investigators have searched ancient records for an event, like the explosion of a super-nova or the appearance of a comet like Halley's, or the conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars.

The motive often was to date the birth of Jesus, as well as to explain Matthew's Star.

But we must remember that Matthew was not interested just in historical facticity.

Instead, Matthew has in mind two key figures who fascinated the world of antiquity: Alexander the Great, and Augustus Caesar.

Alexander had blazed forth in a brilliant career, combining military conquests with the spread of Greek culture and learning. He united East and West in a brief but luminescent Empire; and many yearned for another Alexander.

Augustus finally secured for the world a kind of universal peace. He ended the ruinous civil war begun after the assassination of Julius Caesar and imposed Roman order and government on most of the known world.

The public relations lore claimed that each man's birth had been accompanied by the appearance of a star.

But, the Good News of Matthew proclaims that a new Star has appeared, one which eclipses the brilliance of those two world rulers.

And the hero this Star announces truly will unite East and West, Gentile and Jew; and he will establish genuine peace and true justice. Matthew's Church was already living this claim. And with confidence it echoed the promise of the angel, that his Kingdom will never end.

But the brilliance of the Star of Bethlehem's light also reveals the dark and menacing figure of Herod and his minions:

Herod, whose kingdom is shaken by the rise of this new ruler; Herod, who will seek to obliterate the bearer of reconciliation and peace.

The community of Matthew's Church, which contained Jewish and Gentile Christians, pondered the disturbing reality that this new ruler was greeted both with acceptance, even by Gentiles, yet with rejection, even by the very people whom God had chosen as His own and prepared for the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus, in his life and his death, had experienced both: faith and refusal; and the Church, in fulfilling His final commission, to preach the Good News to the nations and to baptize them into the New Covenant, had itself encountered both that same joyful acceptance and that same persecution.

In this story of the Magi and Herod, Matthew reminds the community that such was so from the first: He who brought peace to those who are near and to those who were far off, also engendered murderous opposition for those powers of evil and greed and injustice, which he threatened.

Could the community of his disciples expect anything different?

The Church also would know the joy of embodying the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, as God extended the gift of Covenant to all peoples.

But the gift would sometimes be uncomfortable, calling all its members to continue to be renewed in the mind of Christ, to imitate the wise scribe who draws on treasures old and new.

And the Church would also know the disappointment of rejection by the people of the First Covenant, and even the bitterness of persecution.

Yet to that community, Matthew would continue to proclaim Jesus' own word of hope and peace: "I am with you to the end of the ages."

What Good News then does this Epiphany Gospel proclaim to us, the Church, today?

Surely, we too are fascinated by the heavens and the stars, and the worlds beyond our solar system, which we've glimpsed in unmanned explorer flights and orbiting telescopes. American culture is also fascinated by the stars of another kind: rock stars and athletes and billionaires.

But this Epiphany, Matthew and the Magi lead us again to a much more incandescent figure, Jesus the Christ, the One born in humility, the One who shepherds the people, the One through whom God fashioned the universe itself and flung the stars into space, the One who is ever Emmanuel, God with us.

And Matthew reminds us too of the joy and gratitude that is ours, for we have seen the Light and have chosen to follow it, and to do homage and give worship to this new ruler who has claimed us.

Matthew reminds us again of the reality of evil, and its rejection of Jesus, and the risk we run in joining ourselves to that Jesus.

And finally, this Feast of the Epiphany joyfully proclaims anew to us that Jesus abides with us to the end, wherever our earthly pilgrimage leads us. Epiphany reminds us that even as we seek Christ, like those first Magi did, he has already found us and claimed us for his own. We don't go to prayer in order to find God but to let God find us; or better, to realize that God has already found us and is waiting for us to show up!

The Magi think they found Jesus, but eventually they must realize that it was because grace found them that they ever set out on the journey in the first place. The Light of the Star reveals that same truth to us.

And, rather than our bearing gifts for the Christ Child, it is Jesus the Lord who has bestowed on us gifts that surpass all treasures: the gold of being his disciples; the frankincense of His Holy Spirit; and the myrrh of eternal life in his coming Kingdom.

May the Light of that Epiphany shine on our way and lead us to His Glory.

And the people of God said, Amen.