

HOW WAS YOUR EPIPHANY?

Matthew 2:1-12

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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INTRODUCTION

Allow me to conduct a brief holiday survey. After Thanksgiving, how many of you had at least one person ask you, “How was your Thanksgiving?” or words to that effect. Raise your hand. After December 25th, how many of you had at least one person ask you, “How was your Christmas?” Raise your hand. How many of you expect that tomorrow at least one person will ask you, “How was your Epiphany?” Raise your hand.

What is Epiphany? Many scholars believe January 6th to be the earliest documented date for celebrating the birth of Christ. The 4th century Bishop Epiphanius of Cyprus said that January 6 is Christ's "Birthday, that is, His Epiphany." Later in history the Western Church adopted December 25th as a special day to celebrate the Nativity of Christ and the Eastern Church soon followed. But January 6th is still known as Epiphany.

In Western Christianity the festival of Epiphany, observed on the sixth of January, celebrates the coming of the Magi to see the infant Jesus (Matt. 2:1-12). The twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany are called the “Twelve Days of Christmas.” Many Christians around the world continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus on January 6th. In much of Eastern Christianity, Epiphany is also a celebration of the baptism of Jesus, a recognition of his manifestation to humanity as the Son of God (Mark 1:9-11).

For most people, Epiphany is an obscure holiday. This is ironic since the word means just the opposite of obscure. It is from a Greek word meaning “to give light around something.” Epiphany is a disclosure, a revealing, a shining forth, making something known. In Biblical terms, an epiphany is an event that discloses something about God and demands a response. Epiphanies took place in Bible times and epiphanies take place today.

1. EPIPHANY: THE EVENT

The Bible has a record of many different epiphany events: such as the fire and the cloud that led the Israelites in the wilderness; the dove that came down at the baptism of Jesus and the appearance of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration of Jesus. But the most famous epiphany in history was the Star of Bethlehem that led the wise men to the infant Jesus.

What was this star? Some say it was Halley’s comet. Others say it was a conjunction of

Jupiter and Saturn. Still others a super nova. But we do not know what it was. Whatever it was, it was an event that meant something to a group of scholars from Persia known as magi or as we call them, wise men.

I want to point out that what is an epiphany event for one person or group may not be such an event for another. Imagine if Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men got together in a post Christmas conference. The shepherds would argue that unless angels reveal Jesus to you then it is not a real experience. The magi counter by saying that unless you see the Star of Bethlehem you cannot really come to know Christ. Joseph interjects and says, "You're both wrong. It has to come in a dream for it to be a true faith experience." Of course, this is a silly argument and that is just the point.

There are many different ways that God uses to bring people to faith. There are many different events that God uses to strengthen faith. Many young people have an epiphany at church camp. A number of people have told me that they have had an epiphany while tossing and turning in bed. Sometimes it may be a book, or a song or a communion service that leads to an epiphany. I know of a dairy farmer who came to faith after one of his cows licked his hand. Imagine if that farmer came to church and told everybody that unless they got their hands licked they were not true believers. That would be ridiculous wouldn't it? There are many different ways that God uses to bring people to faith. There are many different events that God uses to strengthen faith.

2. EPIPHANY: THE DISCLOSURE

An epiphany is an event that discloses something about God but is not in contradiction to what the Scriptures teach. I am always nervous when someone tells me that God has revealed something to them that nobody else seems to know about and is contrary to Scripture. I know of people who have said in effect, "I know stealing is wrong but God told me that just this once it would be okay!" No, no. That was not the voice of God. That was another voice.

If you have an epiphany – an event that draws you closer to God, be sure to be guided by Scripture. If you think God has given you a message but no one else seems to have received this message then you need to be very critical of the message.

It is difficult to argue with the strong emotions that can come with a faith experience. But even good feelings, if left unexamined, can leave us with a false understanding.

A bus driver wrote about an event that happened near Christmas. He writes, "When I stopped the bus to pick up Chris for preschool, I noticed an older woman hugging him as he left the house. "Is that your grandmother?" I asked. "Yes," Chris said. "She's come to

visit us for Christmas." "How nice," I said. "Where does she live?" "At the airport," Chris replied. "Whenever we want her, we just go out there and get her."

Down through the centuries there have been two rules that Christians have used in evaluating any faith experience: 1) the Rule of Faith – Is the experience consistent with the basic core of beliefs as revealed in Scripture that Christians have held down through the ages? 2) the Rule of Love – Does this experience promote the love of God and neighbor? An orthodox experience is one that follows both the Rule of Faith and the Rule of Love.

What the magi said about the Star was consistent with Scripture. They asked about the one born king of the Jews. After the 6th century B.C., Jewish populations greatly increased in Persia. Many magi became familiar with Old Testament teachings. Some were especially interested in prophecies concerning the coming of an anointed king whom God would send to deliver his people.

The real challenge of this story for the original readers was not the idea that God could use astronomical phenomenon to reveal the birth of his Son but that he would welcome these foreign “pagans” into the Kingdom of Heaven! Two thousand years later we are in danger of committing the same error. We think the Good News of Christ is only for people like us. But God wants us to be light for the world, to bring hope to people in darkness, to show the love of Christ to one and all.

John Calvin said, "If the sight of the star had so powerful an effect on the Magi, woe to our insensibility, who, now that Christ the King has been revealed to us, are so cold in our inquiries after Him."

3. EPIPHANY: THE RESPONSE

An epiphany is an event that discloses something about God and demands a response. If you have an epiphany, an experience that draws you closer to God, it is essential that you make a response. The magi responded with worship and gifts. Some see symbolism here: gold for a king, incense for a priest and myrrh for one who was to die. And that's okay. But it is not explicitly indicated in this passage. The point is they gave valuable gifts. Their worship was not mere lip service. What gift do you bring to Christ?

Sigmund Freud regarded belief in God as a neurosis. Today there is a common assumption in the secular media and in academia that religion is harmful.

But in an article in *Christianity Today*, psychiatrist David Larson exposes that assumption as sheer myth. When he examined the empirical data, Larson says, he found exactly the

opposite: religious people are actually healthier than the general population, both mentally and physically. For example, in a literature review, Larson discovered that nineteen out of twenty studies showed religion plays a positive role in dealing with alcoholism. Sixteen out of seventeen studies showed a positive role in reducing suicide. Religious commitment was associated with lower rates of mental disorder, drug use, and extra-marital affairs. People who attend church regularly even show much lower blood-pressure levels.

The standard view that associates religion with psychological problems does have one small kernel of truth, however. Larson found that people who *believe* in Christianity but don't *practice* it do experience greater stress. People who believe in God but who neglect church attendance and Bible-reading, show higher rates of anxiety than the general population.

In other words, the inconsistent Christian suffers greater stress than the consistent atheist. The empirical evidence shows that committed Christians are actually happier and suffer less mental illness than the general population. But the most miserable person of all is the one who knows the truth—and yet does not follow it.

CONCLUSION

According to an old legend, when the Magi were following the star of Bethlehem, they came to the house of a certain woman. They said to her, "Come with us! We have seen his star in the east and we are going to worship him."

"Oh," she said, "I would love to go. I heard that he would be coming one day and I have been looking forward to it. But I can't come now. I must set my house in order; then I will follow you and find him."

But when her work was done, the wise men were out of sight, the star shone no more in the heavens, and she never saw Jesus (W. Herschel Ford).

If Jesus has been disclosed to you, don't put it off, seek him with all your heart.