

Isaiah 60:1-6 “Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all to see. For the glory of the Lord rises to shine on you. Darkness as black as night covers all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the Lord rises and appears over you. All nations will come to your light; mighty kings will come to see your radiance. “Look and see, for everyone is coming home! Your sons are coming from distant lands; your little daughters will be carried home. Your eyes will shine, and your heart will thrill with joy, for merchants from around the world will come to you. They will bring you the wealth of many lands. Vast caravans of camels will converge on you, the camels of Midian and Ephah. The people of Sheba will bring gold and frankincense and will come worshipping the Lord.

Matthew 2:1-12 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“An Illuminated Journey”
Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12
Pastor James York
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In 2004, I joined a diverse group of people studying classical Christian spiritual leaders. It was fascinating and insightful learning from Athanasius, the Desert Mothers, Augustine, Benedict, Clare, Francis, Eckhart, Teresa, Calvin, Underhill, Norwich, Merton and many more covering 2,000 years. One thing they all talked about was movement, journeying. Each had a unique way of navigating on their spiritual journey. They all used different techniques and processes, but all of them viewed life as a journey in which we discover blessings flowing from our walk with God. All of them went through difficult stages, loss, dark nights of the soul, tormenting questions, and uncertainties. Most explained their journey as oscillating between highs and lows. They struggled to put into words transformational epiphany moments – times when their journey took them to a place where logic failed them, experiences with God that were illuminating and yet unexplainable.

Biblical scholars and Christians have spent a great deal of time researching, theorizing, and proposing regarding the identity of the wise men. Who exactly were they? Where did they come from? What was their nationality, status, and careers? Should we call them magi, wise men, astrologers, or kings? Thanks to the hymn, *We Three Kings*, and three gifts, many assume there were three; yet, scripture simply denotes plural, so there could have been anywhere from two to hundreds of wise men and wise women. Did they come from a single eastern region of the world or did they come from several eastern regions? Did they meet up and travel together or did they come separately over the first few years of Jesus’ life?

Perhaps Matthew was intentionally vague in identifying these journeying worshipers, because he wants us to place ourselves in the story as wise people. A wise person is a spiritual journeyer, illumined by God’s light, full of joyful worship and gives their very best gifts to Jesus.

If we enter the story as wise people, then the questions shift from who to why and how. Why did the Magi follow that star? Perhaps the primary reason was because they were searching for a deeper meaning of life. The context suggests they had everything else. They had their own religious beliefs. They had their own science, astrology, wealth, and power. So why the journey? Why would they journey through the desert at night navigating by a star? Rodney Wilmoth writes, "Perhaps the long arduous journey was made out of an awareness of their own emptiness. Despite their religion, science, and wealth, they were coming up empty. They were struggling with a common malady one could describe as "the winter of the heart." Their willingness to follow a star was an indication of their receptivity to God. These wise people were seekers who were willing to anchor their gaze on the star, trusting its guidance, while at the same time acknowledging their own limitations in spite of their reputations of being persons of status and scientific intellect. In that manner they saw someone greater than themselves. Jesus gave them direction, meaning and purpose."

The heart of winter knows the bitter cold winds of emptiness. It knows the pain of uncertainty of purpose. It knows the need to believe in something beyond self. The heart of winter looks for reflections of self everywhere: in the dreams of a quiet January night, in the sound of a name, in the touch of a familiar hand. The heart of winter longs to be born again. It wants to test new ideas. It wants to make plans. Throughout the month of biting winds, the heart continues to ask, "Who am I and why? What is life's meaning and purpose?" Amid all the Christmas decorations we put up, amid all the Christmas carols we sing, amid all our Christmas activities, the heart of winter searches for an answer.

Somehow the wise men knew that God had come into the world through human birth. That God could now be seen in human form, could be touched, embraced, offered gifts, and even worshiped. God in Jesus became a friend, a companion and guide for their journey. Their ability to let go of their comforts, some of their ideas and ways of acting led them to Jesus where there was epiphany, a transformation. They let the light and love of God come and change them for they returned home a different way.

Matthew contrasts the open illuminated journey of the wise people with Herod; a man who sought to hold onto everything and judge everyone and judge every idea. His closed mind and heart left no outlets for his anger and fear. He murdered his wife and two of his sons. His fear of Jesus, and any threat to his throne, caused him to lash out in violence, slaughtering all the children in Bethlehem under two. He wound up dying a bitter, hate-filled man, alone and despised. His life brought pain and heartache into the lives of those around him.

C. S. Lewis describes some of our Herod like tendencies this way: "money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—is the long terrible story of people trying to find something other than God which will make them happy." Jesus put it this way, **Matthew 16:24-26 "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"** Joyful are those who let go, journey with God and let God's blessings come for they are like a tree planted by a nourishing stream yielding abundant fruit, withstanding every storm and never withering.

The story of the wise people is our story. It is our journey for purpose, wholeness, belonging and love. When one journeys step by step, they discover who they truly are, realize they are God's beloved child, grow into a beautiful person and discover their calling. As we journey, we discover how to love and be loved. As we embrace our journey, we grow closer to one another bringing peace, reconciliation and joy to the world, we let the light permeate our being which makes us shine helping others discover the light.

I have studied the book "Presence—An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society" with spiritual director John Ackerman and Pastor David Butler. It is written by a team of people who consulted 150 scientists, social leaders and entrepreneurs regarding positive transformational change and learning. They are trying to explain how transformation happens and how to facilitate and create environments where transformation will flourish. They describe transformation as movement, a journey that takes the shape of a U. It begins with openness and searching. Followed by an attitude shift from self-centered to seeing from the whole. Next, one needs to let go. Let go of patterns of seeing and acting that have us stuck on the surface. Let go of comparisons with others that cripple our ability to transform into our full potential. Let go of applying old solutions to new problems. Letting go of the familiar, routine, and habits. This takes us to the bottom of the U where the transformation takes place in letting come. Letting fresh ideas, visions, love, forgiveness etc. come into one's life. The authors are not writing from a religious perspective, so they struggle to explain where these

blessings come from and how they transform. As a Christian, I clearly see this as the blessings of God and the transformation of the Holy Spirit. The person, family, organization, or community having been transformed in the bottom of the U then journeys back up as they pilot, prototype, envision and embody these blessings, begin to live them, learn from them, evaluate them, tweak them and finally emerge at the top of the U where they live a new way of being.

Their explanation of the U with its journeying, shift from self-centered to whole-centered, letting go, letting come and transformation into a new way of being has been and is the focus of Christianity. Jesus came to invite us on a journey from dark to light, from sin to love, from brokenness to wholeness, from fear to love, from hate to joy, from individual to community, from sadness to passion, from emptiness to shalom. Jesus is our guide and provides transforming grace. We can see the U in the wise people's journey. Jesus crucified, descended, and ascended in the resurrection. Baptism one descends into the water is cleansed and ascends to new life. The exodus, slavery descending through the Red Sea and ascending into the Promise Land. A loving relationship, opening oneself to another and a discovery of harmonious love.

For hundreds of years, Christians have symbolized and celebrated these epiphanies with labyrinths. A labyrinth is not a maze rather a path upon which one journeys. On the journey, upon entering one let's go, in the center one enjoys God's presence letting come, and then having been transformed one journeys to live a fresh life.

For the last 18 years and counting, labyrinth prayer has and is a great source of energy, transformation, and blessing for me. Sometimes I walk the labyrinth here at church. I often pray in labyrinth form when I bike, hike, and ski. At its simplest the prayer is letting go, savoring God and letting come. One journeys to let go of noise, concerns, worries, hurts, sins and distractions until one's mind is settled, at peace and thoughts are no longer popping into one's mind. One centers with God enjoying a comfortable, holy spiritual and mental space to relax, be, listen, and receive from God. One journeys on reflecting on their perceptions of God, pondering how they will share what they received, and how they will grow in loving and being loved. Pondering how their journey with God is molding them into more beautiful relationships with self, others, and the world and considering the legacy God is calling forth from them. Usually, a labyrinth prayer transforms, illumines, and enables one to shine.

As a congregation we have sought to let go of our familiar ways, let go of evaluating options, so we could truly listen to everyone. The session prayerfully opened themselves to God's guidance. Today, after worship, session will share a reimagined Sunday that we will pilot. As we pilot it, we will seek everyone's insights, adjust, and pilot again, journeying to a new way of being that nourishes and transforms. We, as a congregation, will continue to change, face new obstacles, and explore new opportunities. We are invited to journey forth into deeper epiphany. Our next step is to let go, creating space in ourselves, so we are open to receive what is coming.

Faith is an ever-changing relationship. The Christian life is a journey. Occasionally our journey is punctuated by moments of crisis, yet our guide Jesus does not let us aimlessly wander rather draws us Godward. Perhaps you can look back at your life and with the clarity of hindsight identify holy moments; times of learning, love, forgiveness, openness, peace, understanding, or joy. Moments that were pure, nourishing, or beautiful. A moment when you felt whole, complete, loved. Since we are unable to understand these moments, unable to fully describe them, unable to bring them about and since everyone's God experience and journey is unique, we use big, churchy words like redemption, transformation, incarnation, transcendence, salvation, epiphany. We can recognize that we are all on this spiritual journey together, yet each of us is at a different spot. We come together to celebrate with those experiencing highs, support those experiencing lows, and encourage one another on the journey. We worship God who left heaven, so Jesus can journey with us.

The journey of the wise people. We don't know who, how, or why it happened. But it did. Epiphany is like that. You are invited to enter the story, let go, let come and you will have an illuminated journey and discover overwhelming joy. Amen.