

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Sara Dorrian-Christians  
Sunday, December 2, 2022

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## 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.

“What can we do?”

It was the question that came from the other end of the line from a couple of clergy friends who knew how to ask the right questions. I knew that one well. Different from “*Is there anything I can do?*”— *what can I do* is more demanding. It expects and insists on a specific response.

*What can we do?* They asked.

“*You can take down my Christmas tree,*” I said.

An answer that surprised me as it emerged from the pit of my stomach, but the right one.

*Done,* they said.

Exactly three years ago today, this was the conversation I was having over the phone from my mother-in-law’s house in Birmingham, Alabama. The friends were in Memphis, a place my husband and I had left in haste several hours before when we received a panicked call from my mother-in-law, telling us that Bill, my husband’s father and my father-in-law, was in cardiac arrest.

Not twenty minutes after that call, when we were on the road somewhere in north Mississippi, we got another call, this one with the news that Bill had passed.

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Without anything else to do but grieve, we continued on our way even though I was 38 weeks pregnant. One of the few things we had grabbed as we rushed out of the house was the hospital bag that I had packed the week before.

That night, after we'd said our goodbyes at Bill's hospital bedside, I sat upstairs— feeling the tap, tap, tap from baby fingers inside my belly— and talked to these friends, who asked me, *What can we do?*

I've thought about that gut response that I gave three years ago. Such an odd thing to request, and frankly no small thing. It's a chore.

Part of it was anxiety-relief. I didn't know when we'd be home, the tree was exceedingly dry, and given what had transpired over the last 6 hours I was not trusting the universe especially well.

But the other part was less exact. It had something to do with anticipating that walk through our front door, the return home— and needing the physical space to reflect a return to the very real world, and the way in which our lives had dramatically and irrevocably changed. It was most definitely not Christmas anymore. The tree had to go.

That rather sharp pivot away from Christmas is felt by many in the week following the big day, with or without major life events. And it's a pivot that —perhaps providentially—is captured in the Gospel According to Matthew, when the simple birth story, captured in a single sentence— is followed immediately by a much longer narrative, of which we read only a part today.

The longer narrative includes the story of what happened once the Magi left the house: In a dream, Joseph is warned by an angel to take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, escaping Herod's wrath. It was wrath that ultimately fell upon the toddler and infant boys of Bethlehem who were two years old and younger, and their wailing mothers.

Just a week after the most beloved celebration of the year, the events we remember today are a sobering reminder of the threat Christ posed then and now. Matthew doesn't let us linger in Christmas too long. This is the child, after all, who would grow up to drive out the money changers and talk to women and eat with outcasts and demand loyalty to God over wealth. This was the baby who would grow up to suggest Caesar wasn't God, and that Israel's leaders weren't infallible. Herod's jealousy, Herod's rejection, Herod's fury in the face of Christ was a foreshadowing of what was to come.

Of course, Herod's rejection and lust for power is contrasted with the Magi, astrologers—not kings—led as they were to Jesus by curiosity, by wonder, by openness; and led away as they were by an Epiphany, and by love.

Part of Epiphany is revelation. When we consider all that can be revealed, it's clear there is a wide spectrum:

On one end, there is the revelation of information, both good and bad: the diagnosis, the news of marital infidelity, the promotion, the firing.

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On the one hand, information is revealed and on the other, the revelations of God; the ways God has revealed God's self throughout and beyond time— in nature, in beauty, in scripture, in the Word made flesh.

At Epiphany, that is what we remember— the revelation of Christ — the eternal Word of God— made flesh in the babe at Bethlehem.

But Epiphany can suggest more than revelation; it suggests revelation *received*.

The dictionary honors this tension when it defines Epiphany as both “an appearance or manifestation, especially of a deity” and also “a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something...usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience.”

We are told that when the Magi arrived at the house where Jesus lay, despite having gone searching for him, they were “overwhelmed with joy.” We needn't force a confession upon them; they probably wouldn't have recognized this child as God's preexistent Word made flesh. Those confessions would be made later, by a Church looking in hindsight, but the text suggests that the Magi —these outsiders—recognized something. They were changed by this encounter.

Alluding to the posture they took when they followed the star to its resting place, Leo the Great wrote of their “willingness to be led by the splendor of grace.”

The Epiphany of the Lord is the day Christians mark the revelation of God's manifestation in Jesus Christ —and the day we remember spiritual ancestors— people just like us, who were searching for meaning and for hope in the dark and found it.

Though we mark Epiphany today, January 6 is the official Feast Day. On January 6 three years ago, my husband and I welcome our son, Nicholas, into the world, two days after the onset of labor on January 4th, four days after losing Bill on January 2nd. He was, and is, our Epiphany baby— a revelation, without a doubt, of the gift of life and the limits of death's power.

What will be revealed on January 6 of this year?

I have a friend who will meet with an oncologist that day; the extent of cancer's presence will be revealed.

Americans will look back on what happened in our capital one year ago and will reflect. The unhealed wound of our nation will be revealed.

In homes and doctor's offices and board rooms all over the world, there will be revelations of broken trust and mortal bodies and jobs lost.

Surely, without knowing all the details, January 6 of this year will reveal a real world and where we find ourselves within it. If it isn't already, it will be clear that Christmas has passed.

But something else will be clearer: the gift born to us that night is here to stay. The light that dawned in Christ's coming cannot be extinguished. God is here, right here.

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We who allow ourselves to be led by the splendor of grace will find ourselves kneeling and will find ourselves traveling home by alternative roads — of courage, of strength, of hope and peace and joy and love.

In the name of our Triune God, amen.