

THE MEANING OF EPIPHANY  
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Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of 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.

Matthew is the only gospel writer who mentions the wise men. But he didn't just make up a story about travelers from far away coming to Jerusalem, bearing gifts of gold and perfume and spices. He based it on Isaiah 60, which comes from what's called the post-exilic period in Israel's history—the period after the exile.

Long story short, way back in the 6th century B.C., the Babylonians invaded Israel. They marched in, destroyed Jerusalem, sacked and burned the temple, rounded up a bunch of people and took them back to Babylon in chains. Those people, and their children, and their children's children, and their children's children's children, remained in exile until the Babylonian Empire was eventually replaced by the Persian Empire, and the Persian king, Darius, let them to go home. So, they packed up and left. They traveled across deserts and mountains. They endured the blistering heat and the freezing cold. They faced bandits and lions and wolves. And finally, they reached their destination—the place they'd been dreaming of for generations. But the excitement was short-lived. When they got to Jerusalem, it was still in ruins, the temple was a pile of rubble, and nobody knew what to do. After everything they'd been through, how could they even begin to pick up the pieces? How could they even begin to rebuild? They were overwhelmed by the enormity of the task they were facing.

Then along came Isaiah, a prophet who spoke for God. He stepped into this seemingly hopeless situation and invited this exhausted and demoralized community to look up and believe that life would get better. "Arise, shine," he said, "for your light has come." Then he

painted a picture of what the future would look like. Israel would come roaring back to life. Jerusalem would become a major economic hub. Ships and caravans would come from all over, bringing gold and expensive goods, like perfume and spices. "Nations shall come to your light," Isaiah said, "and kings to the brightness of your dawn." The former exiles would sing for joy, their hearts would thrill, and the days when they sat down and wept by the rivers in Babylon would be nothing but a distant memory.

So clearly this was the blueprint Matthew used for his own story about wise men coming to Jerusalem from a distant country, guided by a bright light, and bearing lots of goodies. But it's not quite as simple as that. There's more going on here than just Matthew re-telling Isaiah 60.

When the wise men get to Jerusalem, they start asking around for "the child who has been born king of the Jews," and when Herod hears about this, he's afraid. He's worried about a potential rival—and for good reason. He was not a popular king to begin with, and now he's apparently got some competition. So, he takes immediate action. He brings in the chief priests and the scribes, the highest authorities in the land when it comes to interpreting the scriptures, and he says, "Tell me where I can find this Messiah," supposedly so he can go and pay his respects, but really so he can have him killed. The priests and the scribes quickly find a text that they think helps explain what's going on with these strangers from out of town and this apparently royal birth. But lo and behold, it's not the text we're expecting. It's not Isaiah 60. It's Micah 5, which reads: "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.”

So basically, Matthew was setting us up. He was using Isaiah 60 to make us think, as readers, “Oh, we know where this is going. We’ve heard this before.” And then he shattered our expectation by taking the story in a completely different direction. Because when you compare them side-by-side, Isaiah 60 and Micah 5 couldn’t be more different, in terms of their outlook and perspective.

On the one hand, Isaiah 60 seems like a story about God delivering people from exile and helping them rebuild their lives. But that’s not the only way to look at it. You can also see it as a story about the re-establishment of a ruling class. Because that’s who the exiles were. When the Babylonians invaded Israel, they didn’t take the entire population into captivity. They only cared about the elites, the top few percent—the people who were educated and had something to offer; and also the people who could rise up again if they ever had the chance.

On the other hand, Micah 5 is clearly a story about God delivering people by raising up a leader who’ll save them from their enemies—not the Babylonians in the 6th century B.C., but the Assyrians 150 years earlier, in the 8th century B.C. But what’s special about this leader is the fact that he won’t be one of the elites, and he won’t be part of the ruling class. He’ll be an ordinary person from an ordinary place. He also won’t be a tyrant, like Herod—someone who thinks nothing of murdering innocent children. He’ll be a shepherd—someone who takes care of his sheep. And not just the ones at the top but all of them, whoever they are and wherever they fit into society.

This is what epiphany means, then: God has been manifested among us, but not in the way we expect. God has come to rule our lives, but not like any ruler we’ve ever seen before. And this is what makes the wise men wise. They know enough to know their journey doesn’t end in Jerusalem, like most people would assume. Jerusalem is the capital, the center of power and wealth, and the place where most people would go looking for a newborn king. But the wise men know enough to keep following the star all the way to Bethlehem, an unassuming little village a few miles beyond Jerusalem. And when it stops over the most unlikely of places, not a grand palace but a simple house, they know enough to go inside. And when they see an ordinary woman holding her baby, they know enough to kneel down and pay him homage.

The question for us is: Are we wise like them? Do we know enough to keep following the paths God puts in front of us, even when they take us further than we imagine, even when we think this can’t be right? And do we know enough to trust what’s waiting for us at the end—a new vision, a glimpse of the life God wants for us, and the promise that God will be with us as we live it? Amen.