

God's fingerprints are all over today's story even though the name, "God" is not actually spoken. When I thought about this, I pictured a stage director – not seen by the audience but in communication with the actors on the stage; providing cues when needed, giving directions, making sure all goes smoothly, and only removed from sight by a thin curtain. God is not mentioned but God is certainly there.

Today is called the Feast of the Epiphany. An epiphany is the appearance or manifestation of a divine being. We know that to be Jesus – God made flesh in the baby born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. An epiphany is also defined as an experience of a sudden and striking realization. It is understanding that hits you suddenly – a "Eureka" moment, if you will. In this story of the epiphany, we have a series of other epiphanies but, whether it is the epiphany – the manifestation of God in the flesh – or the other epiphanies – the "Eureka" moments – God is at work in all of them.

First we meet up with the "wise men from the East." We don't know much about them but we do know they were men of wealth and power. They are the symbol of God working to fulfill his purpose – drawing the nations together in the unity of worship. The Wise Men observed a star they say to King Herod. They observed a star "rising" – coming into existence – and they somehow knew – had the sudden realization – that a child has been born king of the Jews. It should come as no surprise to us that the creator of all things – who spoke the world into existence should announce the birth of his Son with the stars in his heavens – the work of his fingers (Ps.8).

...no surprise. What should come as a surprise to us is so much a part of this familiar story – heard over and over in story books, in movies, and in Sunday school classrooms – what should come as a surprise to us is simply another detail in the well-worn, well-loved part of the Christmas story. What should come as a surprise is the reaction of the wise men.

These “wise men” from the East had their own king. They had certainly sworn an oath of allegiance to their king and likely worked for him in his court. These “wise men” are not stupid – they know the Jewish people already have a king and they know where he lives – Jerusalem. They made a beeline to Jerusalem, to King Herod – the king of the Jews – because they had perceived in God’s handiwork that a baby had been born, king of the Jews, and they believed this to be true.

Maybe their human way of thinking was still dominating their thoughts and actions at that point. Maybe when they stood before Herod they had expected to hear the news that Herod’s wife had given birth to a baby boy even though Herod was an older king with three grown sons already. They had come to pay tribute, they told Herod. Maybe they wanted to keep the diplomatic relations in good shape.

This isn’t the likely scenario though. It is more likely that God had a hand in their trip to Israel – drawing the nations to the true king. When it did not turn out to be the case that Herod had a newborn son, they didn’t bat an eye. They did not turn around and head home. They went on following the star to Bethlehem, supposedly with Herod’s blessing, and they came to the humble birthplace of the little baby Jesus.

Here we have another epiphany. These wise men from the East came loaded up with a “treasure chest,” we are told, full of expensive gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – fit for the son of a king, a king they had first went looking for in a grand palace in Jerusalem.

Yet, when they ended up at a stable in a tiny little backwater named Bethlehem and saw the not-so-well-off parents cooing over a child in an animal’s eating trough, they didn’t shake their heads in dismay thinking “we must have gone wrong somewhere.” They knew they were looking at royalty beyond their traditional human understanding of royalty. They had been “overwhelmed with joy” at finding this child. They knew something was different, something was special and remarkable.

And instead of kneeling on the polished marble floor of an ornate palace, they found their knees on the hay-covered dirt floor of a smelly stable. These wealthy men in their fine robes knelt in the dirt and gave their extravagant gifts to the little king before them. These wise men with their own king “paid homage” to this king. God wasn’t done helping these wise men understand that something special was happening. God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod so they went back to their own country by a different road.

To truly understand how remarkable the behaviour is of the wise men – travelling a great distance, believing that stable held a king, and worshiping this king, we need to contrast their understanding – their epiphanies with that of Herod.

Imagine Herod’s surprise when these men from a foreign court showed up in his court inquiring after the newly born king of the Jews that he – Herod, King of the Jews – knew nothing about.

In a flash of sudden understanding – an epiphany – Herod heard “king of the Jews” from the lips of these men and his brain knew that the “Messiah” had been born.

Herod had not been born a Jew, he had converted to Judaism to make his kingship feel more legitimate to the Jewish people. Even so, the idea of a coming Messiah was something Herod would have known about. Waiting for a messiah was a part of Jewish thinking – this messiah was a part of their relationship with God. God knew of their oppression by Rome and would save them, restore Israel to its independence with the coming of the promised Messiah.

So, Herod hears “king of the Jews” – knew this meant “Messiah” – but his epiphany did not overwhelm him with joy like the wise men. We hear that the news of the arrival of the long-expected, eagerly anticipated Messiah, has frightened Herod “and all Jerusalem with him.” Why is this?

First, we need to understand what is meant by “and all Jerusalem with him.” That’s quite the exaggeration really – all Jerusalem means the people surrounding Herod in his court who heard the news as well. And, because a shocking statement like that of the wise men – a new king of the Jews – would have

spread like wildfire through the castle gossip channels, “all Jerusalem” meant those in Herod’s immediate orbit. It certainly did not amount to “all Jerusalem” but it did amount to all of the wealthy and powerful in Jerusalem.

So, I think you may know where I’m going with this. Why would Herod and his wealthy, powerful cronies fear the news of the birth of the Messiah? Because when there’s a new sheriff in town, the old sheriff and his supporters usually don’t fare so well. They certainly lose their power and status, they likely lose a hefty chunk of their wealth, and they may even lose their lives. Herod likes being the top of the heap, the king of the castle and his cronies like all of the perks of rubbing elbows with such worldly power. They don’t want their pampered, powerful lives to change with a messiah who was going to take over and rule them.

What does all of this have to do with us today? We don’t feel like we are wealthy and powerful like Herod but we sure have a lot. Almost all of us have more than we need – cupboards full of dishes, closets full of clothes, shelves loaded with books or movies or CD’s or knick-knacks...you get my point. How many of us have more than a week’s worth of socks in our drawer when socks are the number one requested item at homeless shelters? We have more than we need and we like it that way – it makes us feel comfortable and secure.

When we were baptized, we pledged allegiance to God and to God’s kingdom; we swore we would love God above everyone and everything else. We don’t fear the coming of the Messiah for the exact same reason as Herod – not wanting to give up our worldly wealth and power – but many of us do fear at least sometimes – the arrival of the Messiah. We fear because we worry that we don’t measure up. Well, don’t worry about it. We don’t measure up.

Every week we confess that we have sinned against God – in thought, in word, and in deed. We tell God we haven’t loved him with our whole heart and we haven’t loved our neighbours as ourselves. We tell God that we are truly sorry and something amazing happens. We are forgiven. God gives us forgiveness freely – again and again. That doesn’t mean we can do whatever we want and then just say sorry. As followers of Christ we strive for the perfection of Christ.

We live in a world where we are constantly pulled toward the fear of Herod – he had the same epiphany as the wise men – he knew a king had been born – but the knowledge frightened him. Herod did not want the changes a Messiah would bring....the upending of the world's view of power and success. The world's view is the view we are constantly being sold. As we celebrate Epiphany, a choice lies before us. Do we react to the news with the fear of change – professing our love for Christ but struggling to let go of love of the world? Or do we kneel on the dirt floor of the stable with the wise men?