

Celebrating The Feast of Epiphany



Artwork by Katrina De Man

Star Song

Elizabeth B. Rooney (1924-1999)

*There had been stars
Year after desert year,
A cold light
And a distant
For stars are never near.*

*Until the light
That lighted all the world
Consented to be born.*

*That night He came
The stars swung low
And sang
As morning stars had sung
Creation's morn.*

*So sing we now.
Star-crossed,
We sing the bright
And morning star
Shining among us,
Banishing our night.*

Introduction

On the Christian liturgical calendar, January 5 is the final day of the twelve days of Christmas. With that ending, a new season begins on January 6 with The Feast of Epiphany. This season is sometimes referred to as Epiphanytide and consists of several weeks, concluding on Ash Wednesday, the eve of the season of Lent.

The Feast of Epiphany is a celebration of the revelations of God, particularly the birth of Jesus, the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, and Jesus' first recorded miracle of turning water to wine. Also important to Epiphany is remembering the Magi and their journey from Arabia to find a child born in fulfillment of ancient prophecies.

These themes of Epiphany invite us to reflect upon Jesus, our divine Light who has come to illuminate the darkness – both in our world and in our souls. As our Christmas celebrations extend into the new year, we celebrate Jesus as the Light of the World and consider how His life affects us personally, presently, and eternally.

Getting Oriented

A good way to enter into a time of meditating on the themes of Epiphany is by revisiting the story of the Magi (a.k.a. The Wise Men). Here is the biblical text from Matthew:

Matthew 2:2-12 (NIV) | The Magi Visit the Messiah

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

*“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”*

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”

A Walk of Illumination

As part of our recognition of Epiphany, as well as to commemorate the Magi’s long journey to find and worship the infant Jesus, let’s simulate their travels by taking our own walk of discovery. The purpose of this walk is to activate our bodies, creating a sensory experience that will partner with the spiritual and emotional aspects of our Epiphany activities. During the walk, there will be intentional pauses to consider God’s illumination within and around us.

(Note: we recognize that taking even a short walk may be difficult for some, whether due to physical limitations, location, safety concerns, or desire. Whatever your situation, if a walk is not possible, we invite you to find a quiet, undisturbed place and use the scripture and reflection prompts below for prayerful contemplation – no walking required!)

Your Epiphany walk can take any form that suits you. It can be along a trail, through a field, around your yard, along the perimeter of the parking lot of your church, or any other place that generally allows for quiet reflection. It is recommended this walk be taken at a time when it's dark, carrying a lighted candle or flashlight. This will enhance the experience of a growing illumination as you remember and mimic the Magi whose path was illuminated in quest for an infant king.

You might also consider doing this walk with a small group, selecting one person as the leader, reader of the scripture passages, and facilitator of quiet times of prayer. We can attest that walking through a field at night as a group while holding candles, reading God's word, and quietly praying is sacred.

Below are three recommended stops to make during the walk. These are intended to allow for moments of prayer and contemplation. For each stop are portions of scripture and a few prompts focused on three areas of illumination: outward, inward, and forward. Generally, these stops should be spaced equidistant throughout your walk. As you journey between each stop, remain silent with an expectation to listen and receive from God.

Finally, take as much time as desired at each stop. Quiet your mind, body, and spirit through slow and deep breathing, inviting God to meet you as you focus on His illuminations to you personally (inward), presently (forward), and eternally (outward). Seek a deeper understanding and appreciation of who Jesus is and how you will respond with ever-increasing, faithful obedience.

The Starting Point

Once you are at the place where you will begin your walk, pause to collect and quiet your body, mind, and spirit. Whether alone or in a group, take several slow and deep breaths to relax and still any anxious or distracted thoughts. Notice any tensions in your body as you release yourself to this experience. Then spend a moment in prayer, asking the Spirit to open your spirit to what God might illuminate for you in the midst of your walking or in your quiet place. Then read the poem, *Quiet Time*, either quietly to yourself or out loud to the group if walking with others:

Quiet Time

Elizabeth B. Rooney (1924-1999)

*Now are we winter deep
In quietness.
The shadowed snow,
The gliding owl,
The moon
Keep silent vigil now.*

*We can be still,
So still we start to know
The depth of everything,
So still we hear the stars
Begin to sing.*

Begin walking until you arrive at your first stopping place.

Stop #1

Focus: Our Outward Illumination | The Incarnation

God revealed Himself through the incarnation of His Son, Jesus. He is the Light that overcomes all darkness.

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 (NIV)

2 The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

For Prayerful Reflection

Ponder the hope and joy of salvation. Take a few moments to offer thanks to God for your rescue and His promise to rule and reign forever. What do you feel as you think about God's love and the willingness of Jesus to redeem you from your dark and desperate situation? Is there a name or attribute of God that is especially meaningful to you? Talk with God now.

After spending whatever time you desire at this stop, walk in silence until you arrive at your second stopping place.

Stop #2:

Focus: Our Inward Illumination | The Holy Spirit

The Spirit illuminates the truth about Jesus and how we are to respond with words, thoughts, attitudes, and actions that show our love for Him.

John 14:23-27 (NLT)

Jesus replied, "All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them. Anyone who doesn't love me will not obey me. And remember, my words are not my own. What I am telling you is from the Father who sent me. I am telling you these things now while I am still with you. But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative – that is, the Holy Spirit – he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid."

For Prayerful Reflection

Intentionally welcome the Holy Spirit. Invite His wisdom, comfort, and counsel. Ask Him to reveal (illuminate) any places within you that are closed, dark, hidden, or secretive. Pray to God, asking Him to renew in you (or perhaps continue to provide) an eagerness to live with whole-hearted commitment to the teachings of Jesus.

After spending whatever time you desire at this stop, walk in silence until you arrive at your third stopping place.

Stop #3:

Focus: Our Forward Illumination | Our Response in the day-to-day

Faithful obedience to God means we will illuminate dark places, bringing grace, mercy, and kindness to everyone.

Isaiah 58 (NIV)

True Fasting

“Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion

and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

For day after day they seek me out;

they seem eager to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that does what is right

and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions

and seem eager for God to come near them.

‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,

‘and you have not seen it?

Why have we humbled ourselves,

and you have not noticed?’

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please

and exploit all your workers.

Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,

and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today

and expect your voice to be heard on high.

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,

only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed

and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast,

a day acceptable to the Lord?

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness[a] will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.
Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

For Prayerful Reflection

It's the start of a new year. What might the Lord be stirring in your spirit or leading you toward? Is there something you need to stop, start, or change about how you live day-to-day? Is there anything you need to repent of and confess? Anyone you need to forgive? Talk with God about illuminating your way forward into this new year.

Before continuing, consider closing your eyes and being still for a few moments. Notice the place you're in, the sounds around you, your connection with the earth through your feet. Feel the sun, wind, rain, or snow on your face. Then, breathing deeply and slowly several times, focus on the following with each cycle of breath:

*Breathe in God's Love;
Breathe out God's Peace.
Breathe in God's Hope;
Breathe out God's Joy.*

Break the silence with this prayer before returning quietly to your starting point (consider saying this in unison if walking with a group):

*Father of Lights,
Great Fountain of Life.
Unapproachable, merciful God.*

In your light, we see light.

*Illumine our imagination.
Beam bright the path we trod.
Incite in us what's good and true.*

*For the glory of your Son,
Our radiant Hope.*

Amen.

**For ongoing reflection during the weeks of Epiphanytide
(January 6 until Lent)**

*We who have seen the light of Christ are obliged,
by the greatness of the grace that has been given us,
to make known the presence of the Savior to the ends of the earth...
not only by preaching the glad tidings of His coming;
but above all by revealing Him in our lives...
Every day of our mortal lives must be His manifestation,
His divine Epiphany, in the world which He has created and redeemed.*

~ Thomas Merton

Below are some prompts to assist your ongoing engagement with outward, inward, and forward illumination. Ask the Spirit to help you settle into this season, inviting continued growth in your desire to love God as you love others.

- Of the three modes of illumination (outward, inward, forward) is there one that stood out or captured your imagination? If so, what was impactful and why? Consider writing down your thoughts and reflections to revisit throughout Epiphanytide.
- What feelings and/or emotions did you experience during your walk or in your quiet place? What might those indicate to you? Is there anything you need to bring to God as a result of your emotional experience?
- Was there anything about this exercise that was difficult for you? Did you sense any resistance in your spirit? Invite God into those places that are closed or hesitant, asking him to help you trust Him more fully.

- Was there a moment when you experienced a keen sense of God’s presence? (i.e. did you have any epiphanies?) Write those down so you don’t lose them. Invite God into these new revelations, asking His Spirit to guide you into new areas of growth.
- What might God be illuminating for you personally? What next steps might you take to explore these new revelations?
- Is there anything God is asking you to start, stop or change?

Optional



Chalking the Door

Read this responsive liturgy then “chalk the door” or front entry with a series of marks. The markings include letters, numbers, and crosses in a pattern like this: 20 † C † M † B † 24. The numbers correspond to the calendar year (2024). The crosses stand for Christ and the letters have a two-fold significance: C, M, and B are the initials for the traditional names of the Magi (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar), but they are also an abbreviation of the Latin blessing *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means, “May Christ bless this house.”*

Liturgy of the Magi’s Blessing

Peace be with this house and all who dwell in it,
and peace to all who enter here.

In keeping the feast of Epiphany,
 we celebrate the Magi’s search for the infant king,
 the Christ child’s appearing to the world,
 and the peace and hospitality shared between
 the Magi and the Holy Family.

May this home in the coming year be a place where
 Christ is pleased to dwell.

**May all our homes share the peace and hospitality of Christ
 which is revealed in the fragile flesh of an infant.
 Amen.**

* Adapted from “Distinctive Traditions of Epiphany” by Amber and John Inscore Essick
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