

Epiphanies

Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

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The image on our insert is one of my favorite depictions of the story of the visit of Magi. By artist Janet McKenzie, it's titled, "Epiphany."¹ The word Epiphany means, "showing forth," and I love how this image shows what we expect, and what we don't. The expected starlight, and the love between the mother and child, and the unexpected - as the wise ones surrounding Mary and Jesus are women of varying ethnicities.

While a non-traditional view of the Magi, this image gets to Matthew's point in the gospel text this morning. Matthew is emphasizing the hiddenness of Christ, and the small and often **unexpected** ways God enters our lives in epiphanies large and small.

As one commentator writes:

This hiddenness is a kind of divine signature:
instead of "showing forth" conspicuously at, say,
the Jerusalem Temple or a Roman palace,
God slips into the world by way of a poor family in a tiny town,
under the authoritarian thumb of Roman occupation.
And instead of "showing forth" to a crowd of supposed insiders,
God will be noticed first by strangers from another culture,
another religion, "wise ones from the East."
God does indeed show forth — but in a hidden way.²

Friends, today we're considering how God shows forth in our lives and our world, in expected, and unexpected ways. And Matthew's Gospel guides us - sharing the fingerprints of divine presence. God is present in simple, subtle wonders.

Matthew urges us to pay attention with patient, careful study, like the Magi and their star charts. To contemplate the world around us, take time to notice, to see, and then, have the courage to respond. Matthew urges us to be open to wisdom offered by those with different perspectives, particularly people from other places and cultures. Matthew also warns us about prestigious insiders, and the powers that be. Those who find the arrival of Jesus to be threatening. Tyrant kings who set out to destroy him, and who oppress the children of God.

Matthew's Gospel isn't just about paying attention to the wonder and joy, it also calls us to pay attention to justice and love for all people - which is precisely why Jesus is a threat to tyrants everywhere.³

Take heart, God arrives in hidden, often subtle ways. God acts through unlikely people, arrives in unconventional places, and works to overturn the world, for the well-being of all people. This season of Epiphany - we're called to pay attention to the ways God shows forth in the **reality** of our world and of our lives.

Brother Jonathan Maury from the Society of St. John, the Evangelist wrote these words on New Year's Eve:⁴

It has been a year in which God's world has known misery. Yet the world has also seen the light of holiness shining forth in the many who have found grace to join Christ in acts of humble service for the sake of others. We are becoming children of God as we embrace the way of the cross, our only way of true life, joy, and peace.

The wisdom of the brothers of SSJE meets us where we are, because they are very much "in the world," even though they live in a cloistered community. As tempting as it is to hide away from the chaos and pain of our world, that's not the hiddenness of Epiphany. Jesus was born into a similarly broken time: of oppression and tyrants, of violence against innocents, of economic hardship, and persecution of immigrants. **God came to be one of us in the midst of the reality of our world. And it's in the reality of our lives that we will see God at work still - if we look, with faith and hope, and courage.**

Friends, as we stand at the threshold of another calendar year, we acknowledge the brokenness and hardship of the year past, and we recognize that turning a calendar page won't drastically improve our reality. Afterall, in the few days of this new year, we've had our hearts broken by the horrific New Year's Eve fire in Switzerland. And yesterday we were reminded that violence continues, as we awoke to our country's strikes on Venezuela.

And yet, we are assured: **God came to be one of us in the midst of the reality of our world. And it's in the reality of our lives that we will see God at work still - if we look, with faith and hope, and courage.** So, together, we can look ahead to new paths, new ways forward in the year ahead, a new way home.

Because that can be easier said than done - I invite us to participate in this exercise suggested by the Rev. Jenny Smith. She outlines three steps.⁵

First, ask ourselves a couple of questions about where we are now:

Where did we notice life or light this past year — maybe unexpectedly?

What did the year ask of us that we didn't choose?

What are we still carrying from the year that feels unfinished?

Second, Rev. Smith challenges us:

To name one honest word or phrase that describes the past year.

And to consider what we're ready to stop carrying into the new year.

Third and lastly:

Name something we hope to receive in this new year.

For that to happen, what kind of support might we need?
(From ourselves or from others.)

In closing, a poem that I love, which acknowledges both the brokenness and all that is possible.

"Blessing" by Jan Richardson:⁶

From all that is broken,
let there be beauty.
From what is torn, jagged,
ripped, frayed,
let there be
not just mendings
but meetings unimagined.

May the God,
in whom
nothing is wasted,
gather up every scrap,
every shred and shard,
and make of them
new paths,
doorways,
worlds.

Beloved Ones, may we move into this new year with faith in God's ability to make all things new. May we see and experience the epiphanies around us, and, even amid the brokenness of this world, may we find a better way home, together. Amen.

¹ "Epiphany" by Janet McKenzie, posted on her website and available for purchase:
<https://janetmckenzie.com/prints.html>

² Showing Forth: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany, Dec 29, 2025, saltproject.org

³ Showing Forth: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany, Dec 29, 2025, saltproject.org

⁴ Br. Jonathan Maury, SSJE, "*Holiness*," Brother Give Us a Word, posted on Dec 31, 2025

⁵ Jenny Smith, "Between pajamas and possibility, A gentle invitation at the turn of the year," The Thread, posted on December 31, 2025, jennysmith@substack.com

⁶ Jan Richardson "Blessing," Women's Christmas Retreat, 2025, p 10 (punctuation my own)