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Sermon 9 January 2022

Title: Come to Jesus: 5 Steps to an Epiphany

- Good morning church family, folks joining us online and at our Sunday brunch at the church—we are so glad that you are here and trust that wherever you are, you are experiencing God’s presence this morning in a very real and tangible way.
- Can you believe it is already the 9<sup>th</sup> day of January? Christmas is behind us and we are moving forward into the new year—and I just believe that with God’s guidance there are great days ahead—great days for our community, great days for our church, and great days for each one of us if we will follow the Spirit’s leading and go where we are called to go and do what we are called to do.
- Thursday of this past week, the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, was Epiphany, a day that for many Christians marks the end of Christmas and the beginning of a bit of what we call Ordinary Time, from now until the beginning of Lent.
- Epiphany is a day when we remember the journey of the Magi, who journeyed to find Jesus guided by a new star in the heavens
- And it’s a day when, as I do every year at this time, I post this reminder that Christmas is over on social media—on Facebook—if you don’t recognize those guys, that’s Stephen King, the novelist, and Don King, the boxing promoter, and CNN talk-show host Larry King—three kings, you see—the three kings—it takes a minute to get the joke, sometimes—you know when you “get a joke”—when you see the humour in something, when you understand why something is funny—or why it’s supposed to be, anyway,—when that light-bulb comes on in your head and you

understand—that is something like what we mean when we say that someone had an epiphany—

- Because “Epiphany,” as you know of course, is more than just a day—it’s also a literary and psychological term that describes a moment of revelation, a sudden understanding—when we “get it”—when it all makes sense — sometimes people call that a “come to Jesus” moment—when their eyes are opened and they see their situation clearly—sometimes in a work setting somebody’s boss might say they need to have a “come to Jesus” meeting when an employee needs to understand the way things are done and start doing things the right way—a come-to-Jesus meeting has a lot in common with an epiphany, because
- we might say of ourselves or a character in a story, that they “had an epiphany” —
- BUT An epiphany is much more than just acquiring “knowledge”—more than just figuring something out or learning some new information or even just “getting a joke”—it’s much deeper than that—it affects our behaviours
- The word "Epiphany"—with an upper case E-- was first seen in English around 1310. For about three hundred years, it meant the religious feast day and nothing else. That’s all “Epiphany” was—the day after the 12 Days of Christmas.
- But by the mid-1600s, epiphany-with a lowercase e-was being used to refer to other manifestations of Christ and to appearances of divine beings—even in religions other than Christianity—an “epiphany” (lower-case “e”) became something that happened to people when they had an encounter with the divine—you could say that someone HAD an epiphany because Jesus, or an angel, appeared to them—and so you can see the parallel between an epiphany and a “come to Jesus” moment

- Around the nineteenth century, in the 1800s, the meanings of epiphany began expanding even further, so that today "epiphany" carries a range of meanings, But a good definition of an epiphany is "a moment of sudden or great revelation that changes your world-view, that changes the way you see everything—it's a revelation that provides a new meaning to everything—and because an epiphany changes the way a person sees everything—it changes them, too."
- That's what a "come to Jesus" moment is too—you don't just come to an understanding—a "come to Jesus" moment changes your ways—changes you
- But Thursday was Epiphany—with a capital E—it's also known as Three Kings Day—we call the Magi the three Kings, and the 3 wise men, even though Matthew, the only gospel writer who mentions them, only uses the word Magi to describe them – that's "*magoi*" in the Greek--and he doesn't say there were three of them, but because there are three types of gifts that he lists—gold and frankincense and myrrh—those gifts connect back to Gentile pilgrims that Isaiah describes in chapter 60 of the book that bears his name—and we know how much Matthew likes to refer to the prophets in his gospel—but over the years we have sort of attached one gift to each of them and understood that there were three of them. But we don't know how many there were, there could've been more or fewer than three and we don't know their names nor do we know specifically where they came from—and I guess that's because Matthew is the only gospel writer to mention them—if Luke had told us about them we'd have all the details—we'd know how many there were and what their names were and where they came from and how old they were and who their parents were and probably what they had for breakfast that day—but Luke doesn't mention them—only Matthew does

- In the tradition of the Western Christian church, they have all been regarded as saints and are commonly known as: Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar—scholars, astronomers, from Persia and Babylon—but again, all Matthew tells us is that they’re Magi from the East
- Matthew tells us about the Magi very close to the beginning of his gospel, at the start of Chapter 2—in chapter 1 he’s told us about Jesus’ genealogy and then we find out that Mary is pregnant and an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, then we read the story that Pastor Tasha shared with us this morning, of the way that when Herod was King, after Jesus was born, the Magi from the East come to Jerusalem looking for the King of the Jews because they’ve seen His star. Herod is frightened by this, Matthew tells us, and so was all of Jerusalem—and so Herod calls the scribes and chief priest together and asks where the Messiah was supposed to be born—they tell him in Bethlehem—that’s David’s hometown, by the way—because the prophet Micah had said so—and so Herod wants these Magi to go and find Jesus for Him—he says it’s so he can worship Him, but we discover when he decides to have all the male children around the same age as Jesus killed that what he really wants is to get rid of Jesus—but the Magi set off toward Bethlehem, and they find Jesus and give him gifts from their treasure chests, and afterward an angel warns them not to return to Herod, so they go back home by another road.
- And that, in a nutshell, is how the Magi come to Jesus—those are the details of their “come to Jesus meeting” that we remember at Epiphany.
- And for the remainder of our time together this morning I want to take a look at five things that the Magi do—now when I first wrote this sermon there were seven, but in the interest of time I’ve reduced that to five—we may touch on the other two

another time—but I want us to consider what we might call five steps that they take in order to come to Jesus—because I just believe that each one of them is worth our consideration when we think about how we come to Jesus, and how we communicate to others what it means to come to Jesus

- So let's just jump right in—Step One—the Magi come from afar—now Matthew doesn't tell us specifically how far the Magi had to travel to get to Jerusalem, but scholars and biblical interpreters have worked out that the Magi have been travelling for quite some time—the fact that Herod has every baby boy under the age of two put to death lets us know that the Magi have likely been travelling for most of that time—so the Magi are from afar in geographical terms—from another country—they are foreigners, Gentiles—and so they are not only distant from Jerusalem geographically but also in terms of their traditions, their theology, their religion
- There's general agreement **among scholars** that the Magi belonged to an ancient religious tradition called Zoroastrianism, and were likely members of the priestly class, who were experts in astrology-- which was at that time highly regarded as a science, like astronomy nowadays—that is, they observed and interpreted the stars—they were also likely to have been experts in other sciences, like medicine, and some say that the gifts they brought Jesus were medicinal—interestingly, the word “magic” has the same root as “magi” because of their interests and activities
- I can certainly understand the connection between science and magic—I mean a lot of what science achieves sounds like magic—unfolding telescopes that will explore deep space and vaccines and organ transplants
- But when I think about the fact that the Magi come from afar, I remember that these Magi are not part of the inner circle of Jerusalem—they're not even Jewish—they

are from far away, members of a different religion, stargazers who study the skies—not experts in Jewish Law or Prophecy—but God uses their faith and knowledge to bring them to the Christ—God calls them to come to Jesus. More ironic, God used scientists who practiced another religion to let King Herod and the chief priests and scribes of the people in on the news that their Messiah had been born.

- As I have been studying this week, I had a bit of an epiphany myself—because I was made aware of an assumption that I have been labouring under every time I consider who the Magi were.
- The word that Matthew uses to describe the Magi—magos-- is also used by Luke to describe Elymas the sorcerer in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts—same word, but the connotations when the word is applied to Elymas are negative—this magos, this sorcerer, this magician is something bad, someone who does the kind of magic that you shouldn't be doing—a false prophet—that's in Acts, but when I, and most other scholars read that word “magos” in Matthew's gospel, we have tended to read it with more positive connotations, and to say that it means that the Magi were kings or wise men –or scientists, or astronomers, or even priests—things without the negative connotations that “sorcerer” or “wizard” or “magician” might have.
- And I'll tell you what occurred to me—it occurred to me that I had been assuming that the Magi couldn't be “sorcerers” like Elymas only because I was presuming that to be someone like that would somehow preclude them from God's call to come to Jesus—that they would somehow be “too far gone” to be chosen to receive the news of Jesus' birth and to come to where Jesus was—and you know, I was put under conviction for that idea, and I had to repent because it's not right to say that anyone is so far gone, so distant from God that they can't come to Jesus—and I'm

not saying that the Magi were sorcerers, I'm not saying that at all, but I am saying that even if they were, they were not so far away from God as to be out beyond the reach of His grace and mercy. No one is. Not the Magi, not the shepherds, not a thief on the cross, not a persecutor of Christians like Paul, not a tax collector like Matthew, not a sinner like you or a sinner like me. The Magi came from afar, and so can we. We can come from the far off country of sin and selfishness, we may come through the wilderness of addiction and materialism, across the deserts of doubt and debauchery—but we are never so far away that we can't heed the call and come to Jesus. That's what the Magi do.

- And the Magi come from afar because of this, and this is step two—the Magi looked up.
- The Magi are not so engrossed in their calculations or machinations or their situations that they do not look to the heavens—no they lift up their eyes to the celestial realm, in fact it's part of who they are and what they do to keep their eyes on the skies—and it's there that God places a message for them--there that they find a sign that only they are qualified to interpret
- And they understand that a new star in heaven is a harbinger of a new king on earth—to put that another way, God's will was being done on Earth as it was in Heaven
- And it is humbling thing, and an encouraging thing, to think that what led the Magi to Jesus, what called them to come to Jesus, was not Judaeo-Christian theology, not the Law and the Prophets, not liturgy or good preaching, but the reach of God's grace into their observations of the night sky, and a search for truth and meaning

that began in their own traditions and in their own hearts and drew them toward Jesus.

- And I believe that this is a reminder to us that every now and then we need to look up—we need to move our eyes from our earthly business, the mundane day-to-day—what’s going on down here---what meets the eye--and look up and remember what God is doing in heaven and on Earth—because God is working, God is moving, God is speaking even today above and below—and if we don’t take the time to look up we could miss the connection between the two—the Magi looked up.
- Step 3 involves something that the Magi didn’t do—they didn’t send somebody else to find Jesus—they made the trip themselves—and they made that trip all the way to Jerusalem—and when they got to Jerusalem they didn’t have the benefit of a tourist information center like we might find today so they asked around-- and they were real specific about what they wanted—they knew who they were looking for, and so they asked “Where is the King of the Jews?”—and so you know that the news about these folks showing up and asking around is going to spread
- And King Herod hears about this and naturally Herod is concerned about this—frightened—as was all of Jerusalem—because Jerusalem wasn’t big enough for 2 kings, so Herod needed to do something about this, to preserve his authority, to ensure the continuation of things as they were—so just as the Magi had consulted Jerusalem, then Herod consults the scribes and the High Priests, and the scribes and the High Priests consult the scriptures—the prophet Micah to be exact, and they tell Herod where the Messiah has been born, and then Herod tells the Magi—but in all this consulting, all these questions and answers and finding out how to get to Jesus, it’s only the Magi who actually make the trip. The scribes and high priests don’t seem



particularly interested in any impending change to the order of things, they don't ask Herod why he wants to know where the Messiah will be born, and you would think they'd at least be curious about that—maybe he's heard something about WHEN this will happen-- and Herod is only interested in finding Jesus so he can eliminate the competition—but the Magi, the Magi didn't send someone to make the trip from the East, and they don't send someone like Herod does, from Jerusalem—they go themselves

- And that makes a very simple point and it's this—if you're gonna come to Jesus, you can't send someone else in your place—you gotta make the trip yourself—you can't come to Jesus vicariously—you can't depend on someone else's search—as Pete Seeger sang, “can't nobody else get there for you, you got to get there by yourself”—and it's not enough to just know where Jesus is, you have got to come into his presence
- And when the Magi come to Jesus, when they are in his presence, this is step four—they knelt down and opened their treasure chests and gave Jesus the gifts they had been carrying. Now when they saw the star had stopped and they knew that they had come to Jesus, Matthew tells us in verse 10 that they were overwhelmed with great joy—overwhelmed with joy—while King Herod and all of Jerusalem had been frightened and the scribes and the chief priests had been apathetic—the Magi are overwhelmed with joy—it's as if they know something that Herod and Jerusalem and the chief priests don't.
- And when they enter the house and see Mary and Jesus they kneel down—they humble themselves because they know that they are in the presence of the one who humbled Himself—taking on human form though he was in very nature God—the

one who empties Himself, being found in appearance as a man, empties Himself even to death on a cross

- And after they kneel down they open their treasure chests and give Jesus the gifts they've been carrying—because it's not enough just to come to where Jesus is—we need to humble ourselves and give Jesus the gifts that we have—
- but you know the Magi have been carrying these treasure chests for a long time, across a lot of real estate, and gold and treasures are heavy and will become a burden when you try to carry them all by yourself--and so the Magi give them to Jesus—and we are called to do the same—to come to Jesus and humble ourselves and give him our gifts and our burdens—to say to Him—I've been carrying this a long time, and it's heavy, I'm leaving it with you—and when we do the same thing happens to us that happened to the magi, and it's this, step five
- The Magi went back a different way. They didn't leave Jesus the same way they came. They came to Jesus one way and went back another. An encounter with Jesus will set you on a new path, a different way, a new road-- you may encounter the same people and the same places that you did before but you will be headed in a new direction-- you have a different destination. Your trajectory will have changed
- The Magi don't leave the same way they came—and when we come to Jesus neither do we.
- I think the story of the Magi can tell us something this morning about what Wesley called "prevenient grace." Prevenient grace is that grace the God extends to us while we are yet sinners—that draws us to him—like a star in the night sky—even when we don't fully understand what it means—even to foreign stargazers practicing

another religion, God reveals himself to us as we search for truth and meaning—if we just look up and come to Jesus

- These verses from Matthew's gospel remind us that It doesn't matter where you are—how far away you may be—if you look up, you can see what God is doing—and you can follow—and you can come to Jesus—but you have to do it yourself—you can't send somebody else to do it—you have to humble yourself and give Jesus your gifts and your burdens—all that stuff you've been carrying—all that stuff that's been weighing you down—and when you do, you'll go away by a different way---that is the message for all the world today—look up—look to the heavens and see what God is doing—and follow—go where he tells you to go—come to Jesus—the saviour—your saviour—my saviour---the saviour of the world—the saviour of families—the saviour of communities—the saviour of outcasts, of foreigners, of kings and magicians, of sorcerers and shepherds abiding in the fields. . . come to Jesus and it'll change the way you see everything—it'll change YOU.