January 6, Epiphany (Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12)

Theology is not popularly understood to be a landscape where dreams are welcome.

by Laurel Mathewson in the December 15, 2021 issue

My husband and I started our ministry with our congregation in summer 2016, but in those hot, sun-drenched early months we kept hearing the language of the Epiphany. The church's primary matriarch, Suzy, told the church's story as the story of keeping the light of Christ burning, visible to any wanderers or travelers seeking his presence, even if the size of the flame was modest. The small congregation was rich in faith but poor in budget, and the darkness of potential closure loomed. With minimal pastoral leadership, Suzy and other lay leaders kept the light of Christ aflame in the most unglamorous of ways: arriving early to clean the bathrooms, running upstairs to sing in the choir, running back downstairs to steep the chai tea spices before the service ended, mopping the floors and resetting the tables for another week of recovery group meetings. Many of the leaders came straight from working a night shift, painfully delaying sleep.

"We just had to keep the light going. We couldn't let it go out on our watch," Suzy said. Only God knows how many souls encountered Christ's gracious light on those hard-pressed Sundays, but I stand as one witness: when we visited the church for the first time, a Sudanese elder placed her hand on my back as I knelt at the communion rail, and I experienced it as the hand of Christ. Two years later, I sat in her living room and told her this story, a pivotal part of my vocational discernment at the time. "You probably don't remember," I said. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "I remember. I meant it as a blessing." Christ's light, manifest to the stranger. Small but mighty, hidden to the world in a run-down cinder block building.

The manifestation of Christ to the gentiles is celebrated throughout the season of Epiphany, but Matthew 2 is the dramatic and tone-setting lead. At first glance the Epiphany seems high and mighty, with grand images fit for plays and movies and Christmas cards: royal courts, wise men from the East, the capital's chief priests and legal advisers, new stars on the move, secret delegations. Big, important people at

the center of the world. But then, at the climax of the passage, when “they saw that the star had stopped” and “were overwhelmed with joy,” the colors are more muted and the stage setting becomes sparse.

We see only “the child, with Mary his mother.” The holy family has moved from a stable to the stability of a house, but there is little to indicate the identity Matthew points to in these verses: king of the Judeans, the anointed deliverer, one who will lead and shepherd. The passage reminds us four times that Jesus is a *child*. Yet somehow these wise men respond as if Jesus’ greatness is indeed manifest to them.

How do they know that the glory of the Lord is upon this small child? A compelling star. How do they know not to return to Herod? An alarming dream. How does Paul become the apostle to this child-turned-man? A revelation of “the mystery of Christ” on the road. How does the young church know that this risen Christ is for the whole world? It has been revealed by the Spirit (Eph. 3:5–6). All this wondrous activity makes me think about the miscommunications between the world and the church when it comes to signs and wonders.

The “gentiles” of my millennial generation are generally big on wonder and intrigued by astrology, dreams, and synchronicity. A popular banner for baby nurseries among my friends quotes Vincent van Gogh to a new generation of soft transcendentalists: “I don’t know anything with certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream.” At my city’s children’s museum, the most popular exhibit is the Wonder Sound, an elaborate playhouse filled with ethereal music and keywords among the spiritual-but-not-religious: dream, listen, ponder. None of those words are anti-religious, but they seem pitched in opposition to a shadowy dogmatism, past or present. God is absent from the walls for many reasons, but I imagine one of them is that God-talk has become synonymous with certainty, and theology is not popularly understood to be a landscape where dreams are welcome. Taking direction from the universe or nature is often assumed to be missing in Christianity.

I grew up singing “We Three Kings” in a mainline church, but somehow I gathered that it was un-Christian to think that stars or nature had anything to say to us. My tradition is not defensively allergic to a whiff of astrology, but our enlightenment lineage often places our teaching and preaching discourse above such subjective, woo-woo mediums, in the realm of empiricism and reason. It seems the church has resisted exploring signs and wonders from God in everyday life. Rationalism and subtle materialism stifle such conversation in our liberal circles, while among

conservatives a culture of certainty and concerns over source purity constrain theological exploration.

Yet on Epiphany, our scriptures invite us all to reconsider *how* Christ was manifest to the gentiles then, and how we might witness to the same light in concert with those stories now. Some of that witness—and the wondrous, God-given signs—will come through humble and familiar church work, like an altar candle kept burning, like Suzy’s faithfulness. Other hearts might more readily approach the flame of Christ’s presence among us, like the wise men stumbling step by step toward Bethlehem, if we can more fully communicate what even the Puritan Jonathan Edwards knew: that God ceaselessly reveals himself “alike by his word and works” in nature.