

An ordinary Epiphany (Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12)

The glorious and impressive features are only half of the story.

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The lazy part of my brain wants to categorize Christmas and Epiphany in simple silos: humility and natural grittiness for Christmas (see: the stable, the shepherds, the unrecognized young couple looking for lodging) and then grandeur and the beautiful weight of Christ's glory for Epiphany (see: the foreign intellectuals welcomed in the palace, golden gifts, the light of a star).

Like most brain shortcuts, there are reasons for this. Isaiah's gorgeous invitation to praise is full of glitzy, high-flying images. The "fancy" and impressive details of the Magi's visit are known even to the biblically unfamiliar. There's a reason the "three kings" are the most popular roles in our Christmas pageant almost every year and more than one reason the culture persists in making royalty of "wise men." Their robes (we imagine) are really nice. They consort with the powerful and yet are rebellious and independent-minded enough not to be beholden to them. They have the means to buy nice (and symbolically laden) presents.

And that's just the readings for the *feast* of Epiphany. As we go through the *season* of Epiphany, the lectionary's rumination on Christ's manifestation to the gentiles continues with some pretty spectacular moments: the baptism of Jesus, which may or may not include a public theophany; water to wine in Cana; suddenly overflowing

fishing nets on the lakeshore; the riveting transfiguration of Jesus on a mountaintop.

Yet, like the false herrings of most brain shortcuts, these evidently glorious and impressive features are only half of the story. We can also choose to read, foreground, and emphasize the humbler aspects of the Epiphany, both the feast day and the season. Then we notice what Evelyn Underhill calls the “poor little family party” to which the Magi arrive; the fact that they do not return to the company of Herod; and how, in bowing to the Christ-child, “The utmost man can achieve on his own here capitulates before the unspeakable simplicity of the methods of God,” in Underhill’s words.

This pattern ripples through the Epiphany season, with half of our Gospel readings including the “spectacular” manifestations of Christ’s identity—but in humble, everyday settings!—and the other half reminding us that Christ is also manifest through the very unexciting means of preaching and teaching, in synagogues and outdoors.

Perhaps because most of our lives have shrunk or narrowed with pandemic restrictions and adaptations, the latter seems like a more helpful door into Epiphany wisdom this year. We do not want to forget the particular ways that Christ’s glory was and is known, and some of that is indeed spectacular. But neither can we forget that, as Underhill writes, “the God of our natural life makes of that natural life the very material of His self-revelation.”

The Matthean Epiphany scene reflects well the observation of Ellie Holcomb, a contemporary Christian artist, in her recent song “Color”: “In the stained glass church of ordinary life / I’m surrendered, I am baptized.” The manifestation of Christ continues in our humble places, our ordinary lives. The wise men, impressive as they are, remind us each year not to assume we know under what conditions God’s holy light will overwhelm, humble, and empower us as witnesses and light-bearers ourselves.