

# ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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## The Real Gift of Epiphany

*Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, January 5, 2014*

*The Second Sunday after Christmas—Eve of the Epiphany—Based on Matthew 2:1-12*

Happy New Year! Is it just me, or does it seem like a lot has happened in this past week? There was New Year's Eve, with record numbers packed into arctic temperatures in Times Square. Meanwhile, a church full of people in the warmth of St. Bartholomew's Church listened to Bill Trafka's fabulous organ concert ending at the stroke of midnight, with a delightful champagne reception following. (Note for next year.) Others celebrated in quieter ways, some of us by going to sleep early. Many ways to ring in this New Year!

New York City's new mayor was sworn in, and other new members of his team took office. All just in time for the year's first snowstorm and arctic blast. I have to say I was proud of St. Bart's staff—our sidewalks were clear first thing Friday morning. Staff who could safely do so made their ways in to work; other staff worked from home. One member of the church stuffed all 1,050 bulletins for today's services late Thursday before the snow started. Another member came in to lead Evening Prayer on Friday to save the regularly scheduled presider a long trek in from New Jersey.

Even with all this, there's yet another big event coming tonight. Anyone know what it is? ... Yes! *Downton Abbey* Season 4 starts tonight: PBS, 9 - 11pm Eastern Time, with an 8 pm pre-game: "Secrets of Highclere Castle," where the series is filmed.

A confession of sorts: I became addicted to *Downton Abbey* in its first season. I grieved when it ended, actually felt bereft, not sure how I would get through that summer and fall. I bravely struggled on, but haven't missed an episode since. And yes, I am going to a *Downton* party tonight.

I like *Downton* for many reasons—the costumes, the gorgeous scenery, its story line, the sense of history (though rose-tinted at times), the particular twists and turns of the characters' lives, the characters themselves that we come to know and have feelings for. A couple of key characters disappeared last season. What will happen now? What new characters may appear? What will their appearance mean for *Downton* and the larger scheme of things?

In a way, that's what's going on in this story we hear today from Matthew's Gospel—a story that "has often been better understood by poets and artists than by scholars, whose microscopic analysis has missed its essence." [Hare, Douglas R. A., *Interpretation: Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, p.12)]

This story we hear today is the story we always hear on Epiphany. Epiphany, one of the great feasts of the church, is technically January 6, the 12th day of Christmas. We will celebrate Epiphany tomorrow at our noon Eucharist, but we wanted to celebrate it in a bigger way today, when we are all here together on this Sunday closest to the Epiphany.

This is a familiar story to many of us—maybe too familiar. Do we know these characters? Or do we think we know these characters?

"Herod" is the name of a Jewish family with strong connections to the Roman government, who were puppet rulers for almost 50 years. The Herod in our story is Herod the Great, the only one called King. King Herod did keep the peace, though it was the Roman peace—if you didn't cross them, you were left in peace. King Herod rebuilt the temple, though in Roman style. King Herod was sometimes generous. But he was also known to be paranoid, murdering rivals actual or imagined, including his wife, his mother, and several of his sons. In the next part of Matthew's story, Herod will order the slaughter of children under age two in an effort to eliminate this rival "king of the Jews" who has been born.

What our translation calls "wise men" is in Greek a word more like "magi," from which we get our words "magic" and "magician." Originally, in Persia, Magi were dream-interpreters. By Jesus' time, the term referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or star-gazers . . . We might compare them to people in fortune-teller booths, or people on the "psychic hotline" or other "occupations" that fore-tell the future by stars, tea leaves, Tarot cards.\*

Much of what we think we know about these magi comes from legends developed long after Matthew's story. For the record, nowhere in scripture are the magi called "kings." Nothing in the Greek text gives their names; nothing indicates that there were exactly three of them. Nothing in the text indicates that they were all male. (So the magi represented in our entering procession appear to be biblically accurate!) Someone has suggested that they are called wise men because they actually stopped and asked for directions.

These “wise men” are actually magicians, astronomers—questionable characters. They don't worship the right God. They are the wrong race, the wrong denomination, the wrong religion. They don't know how to worship rightly. They give the child gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but those are elements used in their magic.

But they know how to read the stars. These people from the East saw the star rising in the east, and they followed it. We might say God got their attention where they were, and in a way they could understand.

Isn't it strange that immediately after the story of the birth of Jesus, the very next story is that these people from the margins are the first to meet and recognize the child Jesus as God's revelation to the world. God's revelation not just to the people of Israel, but to Jews and Gentiles alike, to the wise and otherwise, to male and female, to rich and poor, to the powerful and the marginalized—to everyone, to all of us.

The bigger story of Epiphany is that it's a celebration of breaking down the walls that divide us. Epiphany challenges us to erase our own tribal lines, however we draw them: economic, social class, racial, political, denominational, regional, national. Epiphany challenges us to welcome—even to love—those we would prefer to forget, those we really don't want to love. [Dick Donovan, *Sermon Writer*, Epiphany A]

As we begin this New Year, how might God be trying to get our attention—each of us, right where we are, in a way that's unique to us, a way that we can see, hear, understand?

Many scholars think it may have taken those magi a couple of years of following the star to finally arrive at the house where they find the child Jesus. It wasn't like they got specific Google directions and a GPS and just had to follow them. It was surely a process of trial and error, of adjusting and readjusting, of wrong turns and corrections, plenty of days that seemed just like the ones before.

Our own journeys and stories can seem like that. I used to think I would be given an exact trail map: starting point, ending point, here's how to get there. It took me a long time to discover I would not get a trail map: I would get one trail marker at a time. My job was to make my way as best I could to that trail marker and then search for the next one.

How might God be calling each of us forward to new life and understanding this year? How might God be calling St. Bart's forward to new life and understanding this year? What will the twists and turns of 2014 be for each of us? How will we keep moving forward in faith? How will we keep offering God's welcome to all who enter here? How will we keep growing in new directions that bring us and the world closer to the kind of world God is creating, the kind of world God intends for all of us?

On this first Sunday of the New Year, the star is rising again in the East. Let us watch for it and follow it, using the knowledge we have, being willing to learn along the way. Let's set out with the traveling companions we've been given. Let's set out to follow the star and be willing to trust and to be surprised. [adapted from Laura Sumner Truax, *The Christian Century*, December 25, 2013, p. 19]

God's story is bigger than any one of us. God's story is continuing. God's story keeps unfolding, and we are part of it.

*Amen.*

\* I am indebted to the Rev. Brian Stoffregen for much of the background on the Magi.  
[<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt2x1.htm>]