

As we gather this morning, we get to do something that we rarely do. Celebrate the festival of the Epiphany of our Lord – a day that begins an entire season in the church ... also called Epiphany. For those of us who don't regularly think much about epiphany ... or maybe have never celebrated. Welcome – let's learn about this special holiday together and **Happy Epiphany everyone!**

If someone says to you, "I had an epiphany!" – it probably does not mean that they had a big party celebrating the Epiphany of our Lord. For our modern sensibilities, the word means something like – "a moment of sudden insight".¹ But in a churchy, liturgical sense – Epiphany literally means 'reveal'. The day and the season of epiphany are about **revealing** God among us. About our coming to understand and **SEE** God in the Jesus revealed in our world. First as the infant Jesus and continuing throughout Jesus' life and ministry.

In the early church, Epiphany was one of the 3 major feasts of the liturgical calendar: Easter, Epiphany, and Pentecost."² You may be surprised that Christmas is not among those early major Christian holidays. In our Lutheran tradition in North America – Epiphany does not usually hold a place of prominence.

¹ Definitions from [Oxford Languages](#).

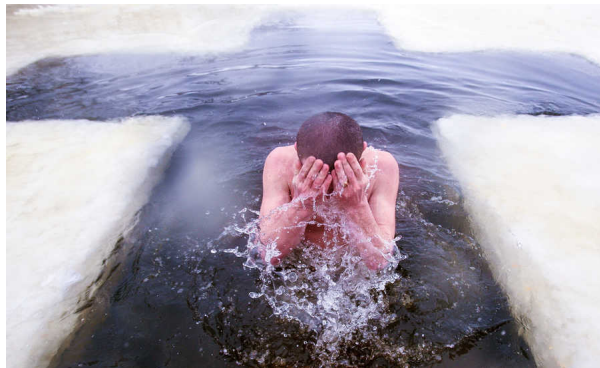
² Dirk G. Lange, "Commentary on Isaiah 60:1-6: Epiphany of Our Lord" [workingpreacher.org](#). Accessed 1/3/2024.

Different faith traditions and different cultures have placed different emphases on this holiday and have celebrated in a variety of ways –

from camel parades to huge bonfires,



King Cakes to house blessings, to the religious equivalent of a polar plunge.



Sometimes this celebration is focused on the magi, or on Jesus' baptism, or stars and light. No matter how we celebrate Epiphany (or if we speed right past it), it is an invitation to **stop and notice** God revealed among us.

As we learn about or possibly revisit this whole epiphany thing – I'd like to invite you into the prophet Isaiah's words to help us grasp what this festival and this season are all about.

For the community receiving the words of the prophet Isaiah in today's reading, the revealing of God to them seemed like an impossibility. The sections of Isaiah preceding today's passage are all doom, gloom, and despair (chapter 59).

^{9b} **We wait for light, but there is only darkness;
and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.**

The words of the prophet are also marked by a yearning for light and glory to come – they feel stuck in darkness and injustice all around. These people had endured **incredible** hardship. After living in exile in Babylon – they have now returned 'home' – but *home* wasn't what it should be. Everything had changed. The city was in ruins. There was major conflict between those who stayed in Jerusalem, and those who had gone into exile and now returned. Living conditions were extremely difficult.³ You can maybe relate to this – after moving away for a while or living abroad – coming "home" can be a painful and disappointing experience – because nothing is quite how you remember it, or expect it to be. Then pile on top of that the layers of political conflict, families torn apart, economic hardship, oppression, and violence. And the words of Isaiah 59 express the harsh reality of life in Jerusalem.

^{11b} **We wait for justice, but there is none;
for salvation, but it is far from us.**

And then, the opening line of Isaiah 60 comes–

³ Lange.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

Wait ... What?!?!?!?

Theologian Dirk Lange describes this sudden shift “like a thunderbolt of glory”⁴

And this, dear friends, helps us understand the core of God’s epiphany. God is revealed like a **thunderbolt of glory** EXACTLY IN the midst of our despair. In the places of desperation and yearning for a way out. That may be a community of people in miserable circumstances – like we see in the context of the prophet Isaiah. Or our own sense of disappointment and lethargy now that the excitement of December holidays and family gatherings is behind us - and the reality of cold dark weeks lie ahead of us. Or to the unexpected happenings of the clan of David in the village of Bethlehem under the occupation of Rome ... this **thunderbolt of glory** in the wiggling, sleepy, tender face of a child.



⁴ Lange.

“Epiphany is a promise that God is here, whether or not we notice the signs.”⁵

Whether or not we are expecting it, or looking for it, or responding to it. God’s presence is among us – whether we’re paying attention or not!

One of the things that captivates me about the story of the Magi in Matthew is their paying attention. It is very unlikely that these men and women were Jewish or knew much about the prophecies foretelling of a coming Messiah. They were paying attention to the skies, however and risked much to travel following a star. “When they saw that the star had stopped”... Did YOU notice? ... “They were **overwhelmed with joy.**”



Overwhelmed with joy! God has been revealed among us. When the magi SAW it. When they noticed. When they can recognize it. They are simply OVERWHELMED with joy.

⁵ Audrey West, “Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12: Epiphany of our Lord,” from workingpreacher.org, Accessed 1/2/2024.

And so it is with the prophet Isaiah. After that thunderbolt of glory, the prophet announces (Isaiah 60:5):

“You shall see and be radiant;

Your heart shall thrill and rejoice.”

When the people can **see** the glory of the Lord, when they lift up their eyes and **look** around – then they will be radiant. Their hearts will thrill. Their hearts will rejoice.

This is breathtaking language describing the moment of connection. That instant when the community recognizes God revealed among us. When eyes are opened to an unexpected reality. In this moment of epiphany: joy, radiance, thrill. These are not manufactured responses – but almost being overcome by the Spirit of God among us ... like a thunderbolt of glory.

If joy seems far from you this day – do not lose hope. Epiphany is about God’s light in the darkness. Revealing Godself when things seem hopeless. Finding the Spirit in unexpected place. “Epiphany is a promise that God is here, whether or not we notice the signs.”⁶ Our invitation this epiphany, is to pause and take notice God revealed among us.

⁶ Audrey West, “Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12: Epiphany of our Lord,” from workingpreacher.org, Accessed 1/2/2024.

May you, dear ones, be overwhelmed by JOY – in noticing and recognizing God's promised presence among us this day and always! Amen.