

TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12  
THEME: Overwhelmed with joy  
SUBJECT: Illumination  
TITLE: In the Grip of Light

Epiphany  
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Messiah Moravian  
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As lightning flashes from east to west, illuminating the whole horizon, striking where it pleases, so the infinite liberty of God flashes in the depths of the soul, illuminating reality. (Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*)

Thomas Merton writes of what he knows. In 1933, visiting the remains of an old church in Rome, viewing a Byzantine fresco; in 1953 in a temporary hermitage in an old tool shed he named “St Anne’s; in April 1965 in his hermitage in the woods; he knew moments of clarity, of seeing beneath the surface, beyond the veils, through illusion to reality.

We long for such moments of clarity. They fill us with joy. The poet describes the experience:

Space opens and from the heart of matter  
sheds a descending grace that makes,  
for a moment, that naked thing, Being,  
a thing to be understood.

Such moments redirect our lives. The magi return to their country by another path.

In the story of the magi, Matthew depicts three moments of “descending grace.” The first moment is occasioned by nature. The magi were from the priestly class in Persia. They read the stars for divine guidance.

The Psalmists intuited God’s presence and character from reflection on the created order (Psalm 19):

The heaven’s tell God’s glory,  
and His handiwork sky declares.  
Day to day breathes utterance  
and night to night pronounces knowledge.  
There is no utterance and there are no words,  
their voice is never heard.  
Through all the earth their voice goes out,  
to the world’s edge, their words.

Jesus believed the natural order possessed some capacity for revelation. “Pay attention to the birds of the sky, look closely at the lilies of the field.” The creator is manifest in creation.

The second moment of illumination is occasioned by scripture. Nature only takes us so far, Matthew implies. Scripture is needed to guide us to Christ. But reading scripture can be like reading the stars, any number of interpretations are possible. Even Herod knows this, thus he consults the chief priests and the scholars. To read rightly requires rigorous training and experience.

Paul reminds Timothy that from infancy he has known the sacred scriptures, the source of saving wisdom. Every scripture divinely inspired is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that you may be prepared for every good work.

A third moment of illumination is occasioned by dreams. In a dream Joseph is assured of Mary's righteousness, and he is commanded to take her as his wife. In a dream Joseph is warned of Herod's murderous intent, and he, Mary and baby Jesus, become refugees in Egypt. In a dream the magi are instructed to find another route home to escape Herod's wrath.

Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, saving two peoples from mass starvation. Freud's classic *Interpretation of Dreams* and Jung's theory that our dreams are doing the work of integrating our conscious and unconscious lives, proved illuminating for many.

The stars, the cosmos, scripture, dreams: means of illumination. Space opens and from the heart of matter sheds a descending grace that makes, for a moment, that naked thing, Being, a thing to be understood.

Let's be honest. Nature does not speak unambiguously of God's glory. Nature is not all sunrise, sunset, birds of the sky and lilies of the field. Nature is also tsunami, hurricane, earthquake and fire. Scripture is not unambiguously a training in good works; it is also bound to the cultural norms of the times in which it was written. Dreams are not unambiguously moments of divine guidance; they also traffic in fear and fantasy.

How do we know we are in the grip of light and not possessed by the demonic? It is not a heart strangely warmed, however comforting, that assures us of God's embrace.

It is not a mind overwhelmed by joy at discovering what it seeks, however enlightening, that confirms we see through illusion to reality. It is not ecstasy of spirit, not speaking in tongues, not even ascending to heaven, however inspiring, that guarantees the guidance is from God.

We know we are in the grip of light when our lives are redirected, when whatever illumination we have received results in committed service to our neighbor. The surest sign of divine illumination is every good work, working to keep human life human.