

# Epiphany: A New Kind of Journey

by Ruth Haley Barton

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Today is the day when the Christian church celebrates *epiphany*—the “showing forth” or “the revelation” of Christ in the world. Epiphany takes its themes from the journey of the wise men who left familiar territory in order to begin a journey of discovery to find the Christ child and explore his authenticity for themselves.

Epiphany is a wonderful celebration for those of us who are committing ourselves more deeply to the process of spiritual transformation for it contains within it the themes of journeying from the known to the unknown with only a mysterious star to guide us. Compelled by an inner desire for a deeper experience of God’s presence with us and guided by the appearance of some light of spiritual possibility, we are brought to that choice point that is at the heart of all spiritual journeying. At some level, we are called to leave familiar territory with all the trappings that keep us feeling confident, secure, in control—for places that are unknown and require humility, letting go, and moving bravely in a new direction. Whereas the Advent themes have to do with receptivity and waiting, the themes of epiphany highlight our response to the presence of God showing forth in our lives and beckoning to us to move beyond all that we think we know.

Epiphany has to do with seeing something new on the horizon that stirs something new in us. In response to this glimpse of the More (which may, as yet, be undefined and hard to explain) we strike out on a journey in which we seek to discover a deeper experience of spiritual reality--more of God in Christ--than we have experienced in familiar territory. We walk toward it, not only in our spirits but through concrete action and directional decision-making in the time and space of our lives.

Who knows what priorities and personal ambitions the wise men left behind in order to take such a strange journey? Who knows what kings and councils were clamoring for their services, claiming that they were indispensable in crafting plans and strategies? Who knows what kinds of complexity and problem-solving were pressing in when the inner hunger stirred? But they set off anyway, responding to that which was deepest within them. The journey took them beyond familiar territory geographically but also internally. Yes, it was a physical journey, but it was also a spiritual journey that involved learning to recognize the showing forth of God in a place that is smaller and more humble, more human and more intimate than the places the ego journey drives us to.

And what unfamiliar territory it was for these wise men—a strange country, less-than-adequate accommodations, common ordinary people. But in this strange place so far outside their comfort zone, they found what they were looking for. *They saw the child with Mary his mother and they knelt down and paid him homage.* They knew that what

they had found was real for it resonated in an entirely different place within them. Their response to Christ's presence stirred their emotions (they were overwhelmed with joy), it was experienced in the body (they knelt down and worshipped), it overflowed in generosity of spirit (they gave him extravagant, heart-felt gifts), and fostered very clear spiritual guidance for their next steps (which came to them in a dream.)

What a new experience it must have been for these wise men, who were probably more accustomed to living and leading from their heads, to be overwhelmed by joy, to have a visceral experience of their bodies wanting to pray, to experience God guiding them—through a dream of all things! This was a new kind of journey, a journey that raised a whole new set of questions.

O God,  
who am I now?  
Once, I was secure  
    in familiar territory  
    in my sense of belonging  
    unquestioning of the norms of my culture  
    the assumptions built into my language  
    the values shared by my society.

But now you have called me out and away from home  
and I do not know where you are leading.  
I am empty, unsure, uncomfortable.  
I have only a beckoning star to follow.

Journeying God, pitch your tent with mine  
so that I may not become deterred  
by hardship, strangeness, doubt.  
Show me the movement I must make  
toward a wealth not dependent on possessions  
toward a wisdom not based on books  
toward a strength not bolstered by might  
toward a God not confined to heaven  
but scandalously earthed, poor, unrecognized...

Help me find myself  
as I walk in others' shoes.

Kate Compston, England, 1990  
*Bread of Tomorrow: Prayers for the Church Year*

What might we learn from walking in the wise men's shoes as the poem suggests? What is there for us to learn from those who left familiar territories to follow a mysterious star?

Might we see that real wisdom is sometimes found in places deeper than human thought where the willingness to notice our desires and follow our questions leads us into expected joy? Might we learn that sometimes our bodies have wisdom that our minds know nothing of, telling us when it is time to drop to our knees and give our allegiance to something small and humble rather than something large and impressive? Might we discover that one sign that we have truly "seen" Christ is the extravagant giving of ourselves in response to this God-come-near? Could it be that sometimes there is a need to disobey (or at least side-step) the "powers that be" in order to respond to a deeper reality? Might we learn something about the nature of discernment--that truly it is given as pure gift (even when it comes through a dream!), warning us of danger and guiding us to find a new way home so that we don't have to return by the same old way? And, when it is time, might we be willing to return to our own country—the place where we are called to live and lead—bearing within our souls and our bodies a truer wisdom born from a humble encounter with Christ?

Isn't this the kind of leadership that people are longing to follow?

### **For Reflection**

The Christmas season is not over until we ask what do the wise men have to teach me? Is there a new light on the horizon beckoning me to go further in my spiritual journey as this New Year unfolds? How far am I willing to go to follow the light that is given to guide me? Is there any next step that is clear?

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