

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*January 5, 2020 – The Epiphany of the Lord*  
*Matthew 2:1-12*

No one would ever call Jesus a "show off." But today's feast, the Epiphany, is exactly about Jesus showing off. The point is that in God's wisdom it was important that we humans have a way to know God. God wants us to know that God exists, that God created the universe and remains part of that creation. Finally, God wants us to know that God loves us much more than we can imagine. For us to know this, God seeded Creation with clues about God. The biggest clue, of course, was the Incarnation, God taking human form in the person of Jesus Christ. Seeing Jesus was, in God's Plan, for seeing God.

Therefore, Jesus had to appear at a particular time and in a specific place. And the historical manifestation of God in Jesus (that's what the word *epiphany* means) is what we commemorate today. In a sense, we could say this was God's "coming out" into the world. And to emphasize the global nature of God's appearance, Matthew tells us about the visit of three magi, or as they are commonly called, three wise men. (They were not three kings, despite the well-known hymn.) In those days, they would be thought of as coming from the known ends of the earth.

Some translations call them astrologers, That's misleading. To be more accurate, they were more like what we call "scientists." They came from an area known for its early scientific investigations. In today's world we would call them astronomers or cosmologists. They were especially interested in the stars above. So, it was not outside possibilities that Matthew describes them as God leading them to Jesus by a star. Again, Jesus came to be seen and known, especially in his public life many years later when, through word and deed, we would gain a fuller understanding of God's ways with us.

As I mentioned, God seeded the world with clues about God. But we must search for those clues. The whole life of the church is supposed to provide us with these clues through its liturgies, its teachings and its example. So too is each of us. We are "other Christs" for each other. Sometimes we do not live up to our calling. But that's another story.

One message of today's feast contains a challenge. It goes something like this. Are we (like the magi) looking for signs of God's presence among us? Do we even think about God's presence in those we live with or encounter each day? God may be "appearing" to us every day, but if we are not looking for God there (or anywhere), we won't see God. Stars (and all creation) are one giant sign of the One who created it. We are encouraged by this feast to continue looking for God's presence in our world. For God is there!

David M. Thomas, PhD

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*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*January 12, 2020 – The Baptism of the Lord*  
*Matthew 3:13-17*

The main actor in God's wonderful Plan for our salvation is Jesus. But others had parts as well. First, Mary, the Mother of God, had to agree to be the one where the Word would become flesh. St. Joseph played a major role in his willingness to care for and protect Mary especially during those early dangerous years. Finally, there is St. John the Baptist, whom we hear about in today's gospel. The Plan of God is at its heart, a family story.

John the Baptist appears at the beginning of the public life of Jesus. He had already established himself as a religious prophet, calling people to repentance and baptizing them on the banks of the River Jordan. John, it appears, was quite aware that he was not the "hoped for Messiah" although he seemed to know that the coming of the Messiah (meaning "the one sent from God") was about to happen.

Likely through divine inspiration, John recognized that Jesus was that Messiah. When Jesus happened by one day where John was doing his baptismal ministry, John became excited. He seemed quite willing to step aside and allow Jesus center stage. But that was not to be. At least, not yet.

John felt that Jesus should baptize him, not the other way around. But that was not God's Plan. Thus, Jesus first submitted to John's baptism and then *everything changed*. God's Spirit descended on Jesus, communicated to Jesus in his human nature that he was God's beloved and that his mission from God was now to begin. This all could have happened in a thousand different ways, but it didn't. God's Plan was to be respected and enacted.

And the same can be said about us. God has a plan for each of us. We all have a vocation or calling from God. While we may spend our whole lives only gradually becoming aware of our personal vocations, that's okay. This is often the way that God works. There are gospel clues that Jesus himself in his human nature only gradually became aware of his vocation.

During his Agony in the Garden, he asked God if it's possible to be relieved of his impending passion and death. Of course, we know that he eventually submitted to what God wanted. He said that not his but God's will needs to be the final word.

As we begin this new year and decade, maybe it's a good time to ask ourselves what God is asking of each of us. We all have a calling from God. Do we ever think about what God is inviting us to do? At home? At work? Everywhere we go.

David M Thomas, PhD

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*January 19, 2020 – Second Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*John 1:29-34*

This Sunday the Church has slipped in a second account of the baptism of Jesus. This time we hear from John's gospel. Biblical scholars tell us that this was the last of the gospels to be written down. There is general agreement that it comes from near the end of the first century. It shows how the church came to an ever clearer understanding of who Jesus was.

From Matthew's gospel (written maybe 30 years earlier) we hear Jesus being identified as "the beloved son." This week John states that Jesus is "God's Son." What this suggests is that the first Christians gradually (not all at once) came to realize and believe in the full identity of Jesus as both human and divine. How these two aspects of Jesus are connected remains a great mystery of Faith. That God, creator of all that is (and from recent science we know that this is a lot - as in billions and billions of galaxies and stars) came to our small planet to be one of us, live with us, speak to us and eventually die for us ... well, that is no small matter. In fact, if we list all possible events that we might call "incredible," the incarnation of God in Jesus has to be at the top of that list.

Jesus lived among us and major moments in his life are described in the gospels. That's almost a miracle in itself. We know more about Jesus as an historical figure than any other person living at his time. We not only know generalities, but very specific events of his life, like his baptism. We also have a reliable record of many of his actions, particularly when he helped others in need, like the lame, the blind, the sick, the confused, the poor. As is said, he went about "doing good."

Further we are blessed with an extensive record of what he said and taught as a rabbi. We have a wide assortment of parables and stories, like two of my favorites, "The Prodigal Son" and "The Good Samaritan." We have lengthy accounts of his teachings like "The Sermon on the Mount" and "The Final Discourse at the Last Supper." We have detailed descriptions of his painful passion and death. And certainly, last and not least, the various accounts of his life after the Resurrection.

We do well to think of all this as actions of God and not merely deeds and words of a good man. They are all God's word to us. They are of singular importance in the history of humanity on Earth. God's words through Jesus deserve not only our respect, but our serious thought because they are directed to us. Another way to think about the Incarnation of Jesus is that God went to great trouble to help us to be as good as we might be. Should not we want the same?

David M. Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*January 26, 2020 – Third Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Matthew 4:12-23*

Reporting the news of the day creates interest in our world. Otherwise, we would not have so many television channels reporting newsworthy events - some, twenty-four hours a day. Granted not many people would be tuned into those broadcasts 24/7, but still, we are, in general, a news-hungry and news-conscious group.

In the time of Jesus there was no TV, radio or even newspapers. Thus, if a citizen wanted to know what was going on locally or more widespread, that person depended on people who brought the "news" to each local area. Most likely, "reporters" would simply enter a village or town, walk to a common area and in a voice that could be heard, tell the locals what was going on, perhaps in a neighboring village or with a local ruler or if there were invading armies. In other words, information that allowed locals to make practical decisions, sometimes dealing with matters of life and death.

The news that was brought was sometimes positive and sometimes not. If it was good news, the word used to describe it was "evangelium." The Latin word for "gospel" or "good news." That's how the gospels described the original message of Jesus. Jesus came to bring good news.

And what exactly was it? That God's kingdom, which involved God's active presence in the world, had begun with the coming of Jesus. In today's language, what Israel had hoped for through its many years of waiting for a better time was now operational. And in saying that it was "at hand," Jesus was saying that there was no need to wait or look for something else. It was present. It was active. It was real.

And it continues to be so to this day. The work of Christ began more than two-thousand years ago and continues today. Right now we are in the midst of God's kingdom unfolding as God's Spirit is present and active among us and through us. God's world is being created day by day.

Right after Jesus announced this "good news," he went in search of others to help him pass on this message. He needed to assemble a news team. We know his first "reporters" as Peter and Andrew, James and John. Recruiting continued through the centuries. Each of us is invited to spread the good news of Jesus. And we do this first among those we live with by being persons of hope and loving those we encounter each day. Just like Jesus did.

David M. Thomas, PhD