



BelPres Church

Epiphany

Speaker: Sergio Chavez

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I know he just prayed, but I'm going to pray again. Are we okay with double prayer? Sometimes I need it, baby. Here we go. Father in heaven, thank you so much, Lord, for this day, Lord. May my words be your words, Lord. Thank you so much for the blessings you continually pour upon us. The roof that's overhead, the clothes that's on our back, and the food that's on our table. We know that people in our community here are struggling with that, Lord. So give us eyes to see and ears to hear on how we can help in that. If you call us, Lord, as well as thank you for the breath that is in our lungs, Lord. We will experience a new day and a new year, Lord, to experience your love, your mercy and your grace, not just for ourselves, but to share that with others, Lord. Thank you so much for loving us, in your beautiful and your glorious name. Together, we all said, Amen.

Well, back in 2019, I went on my second mission trip to Romania, and I was staying a day past the team. So we took the team to the airport, and then one of the pastors stayed behind with me, and we stayed at a hotel that was near the airport. And we were in Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania. And since I had that extra day, since I can read and understand a little bit of Romanian because it is a Latin-based language, like Espanol, I thought, why don't I take the chances and try to make it back to one of the big super malls.

If you've ever been to Bucharest, Romania, these super malls are ridiculous. They're like four levels high. They have like ice skating rings, climbing walls, bowling alleys, theaters. I mean, it is a mega complex. And I thought, well, let me use that day to go back and buy some souvenirs for my family. I figured I probably can make it with my 10 words of Romanian.

So I asked my pastor friend, who was Samoan, by the way, said, hey, do you want to come with me? And he's like, yeah, sure. Let's get lost together. So now I didn't have the fancy phone with the maps and stuff. So I just had to read and figure it out. So we jumped on a bus, we got to a train and we got into downtown Bucharest.

Now, if you've never been to Bucharest, it's one of the top 10 largest cities in Europe, and a lot of people. So you could easily get lost pretty quick if you're going the wrong way. It's a big place. So I thought even though I have a pretty good sense of direction, maybe I should use my 10 Romanian words and ask somebody for directions.

Now, I've been to other countries, I'm from a different culture, and when you ask for directions from people, it's different around the world. Now, for US Western literal culture, when you ask for directions, you kind of want to hear, go three blocks and then take a left and on the roundabout, cross that, and then you'll see the entrance to a place. That is not universal.

In Romania, he just said, yeah, go that way and it's on the left. Okay, not how long that way, four miles, 10 miles, 20 miles. I don't know, just keep on going. Fortunately, I was prepared for such things. We did walk, it was long ways, and we found our way there.

But we were two foreigners, a Mexican pastor and a Samoan pastor, in the middle of Romania, trying to find something that we kind of had an idea where it was, but we needed some local help to get us there safely. That is similar to the story of the Magi looking for Jesus. Now, obviously, we were not looking for Jesus, we were just looking for a mall, but it's similar. You know, they had a general idea of where to go, but needed some local assistance because they were foreigners.

Now, hopefully, you guys had a good Christmas, a good Christmas Eve, a good New Year's. But if not, then let us trust in the Lord that the Lord will carry you. I know that at the same time that all this joy is supposed to be happening, all this fun is supposed to be happening, sometimes the holiday season can be difficult for some of us. It's hard for many.

But praise the Lord, we have God, Emmanuel, who is with us in all times, times of joy and times of challenges. And that brings us hope. Which brings us to today. Today is in the liturgical calendar, Epiphany Sunday. Now, if you don't know what the liturgical calendar is, because I didn't either, I didn't grow up Presbyterian, so I have no idea what that is.

The liturgical calendar is simply a system to help guide the church worship services around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now, and today is Epiphany Sunday, which is the first Sunday after the New Year. This is a Presbyterian church after all. Epiphany Sunday is kind of a big deal that I've heard, that I'm coming to know.

Now, Epiphany, which the Epiphany signifies God's manifestation in Jesus Christ, God made man to the world through the Magi or the wise men. And the word Epiphany means appearance or revelation, which is the word that I will focus on today, this revelation, because that is where we find hope.

Now, the revelation is celebrating Jesus' divine nature, revealed to all people, not just Jews, which is part of the promise that we hear God give Abraham back in Genesis 12, in the beginning of the Bible, Genesis 12.3, all people on earth will be blessed through you. God's speaking to Abraham.

So, if you brought your Bibles today, pull them out. If you didn't bring your Bibles, that's okay, no judgment. It'll still be on the screen. My Bible is actually in this weird little thing, because I lose things. Somehow, I'm attached to this.

Because we're going to cover scripture that Pastor Scott actually covered last month. That's Matthew 1 through 12. So, you can start looking for Matthew 1 through 12. But we're going to journey a little further into the story within the theme around Epiphany Sunday. So, let's read scripture together. You guys cool with that? Can we read scripture together? Is that all right? I mean, you're in a church after all.

I don't know what you thought was going to happen up here. I'm not going to juggle bowling pins or whatever. Unless, I guess, who knows? We'll leave that for another sermon. Scott can preach that one. We'll make some observations together and ask ourselves some faith questions about seeking truth or avoiding it.

So, let's dive in. Matthew 2, 1 through 4. I'm reading the NIV, but let's go whatever transition you got.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? Who saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him? When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

So first thing first, Jesus has already been born. He's already fully cooked, ready to go. He's about a year old at this or two years old at this point. So like Pastor Scott said a few weeks ago, sorry to ruin all those Christmas myths about the Magi coming to when Jesus was just born in the manger. This is later. They're like in a split level home in Bethlehem somewhere at this point.

So we know and we also know that King Herod is in the picture, who came to be known as King Herod the Great. Although he was terrible, but that's the name that he got, King Herod the Great, who was called King of the Jews. But that was a political title. He gained it by playing the political game with Rome, and he was not born King of the Jews.

And the Magi, the wise men, well, they came from the East. Is that East? East. If not, don't worry about it. Now, we have to take away a little Western Christian mind just for a second, and we have to realize that Christianity is not a Western religion. It came from a place that we now call the Middle East.

And the only reason why we call it the Middle East is because the United States and Europe decided to call it that in the last century, just in the 20th century. Before that, it was just Judea and Palestine and Northern Africa. So we call it the Middle East. And these cats, these Magi came from Easter than that. They came from the East of that.

For those of you who don't know me, I call people cats, just so you don't get confused. It's not cats coming from China to the Middle East. It's actual people. If I tell you it's a real cat, I'll make that distinction. Not to confuse you.

And these Magi, literally Magians, probably of a learned class who cultivated astrology and sciences, they are a group who were open and accepting of truth and faith. Some scholars believe that they were desert people, and they didn't travel during the day because it would be scorching hot. And so they traveled at night. And that is how they navigated where they were going through the stars. And that is how they saw this star.

Which brings us to our first observation. The Magi were seeking truth. The Magi were seeking truth. Some scholars believe that they may have known of Balaam's prophecy from numbers from scripture, or potentially from the prophecies of Daniel 9. That might have come down to them through tradition, but nothing is really definite. We can't really say that that's the case.

But it's also possible that they didn't have any of those prophecies, and they had different beliefs and different faith systems. But either way, the universe,

literally the universe, a star, guided them to Jesus. And this highlights a unique aspect of the Magi. They are outsiders. They were Gentiles and not Jews. They had customs, beliefs, and most likely a different perspective than the Jews of that day.

Which brings us to our second observation. God calls all people, not just those in churches and synagogues, but all people seeking truth. Now, again, we kind of have to separate ourselves from the Hallmark Christmas that maybe some of us grew up with. And there most definitely were not three Magi. Most scholars would agree that there was probably quite a big entourage, and there could have been a couple hundred of them, but definitely not three.

And one of the ancient Magi's job was to announce kings and to consult royalty. We know this from Pharaoh back in the Book of Exodus, as he had royal consultants called what? Starts with an M, sounds like Magi. Magi, there we go. Hey, you guys are one for one. I like it.

This is why King Herod was troubled, because scholars believed he knew what Magi's were for, and he was the king of the Jews. Now, this huge entourage of Magi coming in to announce a king, wait a minute, I'm already king, or to give consult to royalties, like, I didn't ask for any consultation. Why are you here? This is why the Magi went to him first. He was the king, so they asked him, we followed the star, so where's the one born called king of the Jews? All of Herod the Great's council were like, what's wrong with you? So Herod gets a little bent out of shape.

Let's put it that way. Let's use some church words. And Herod asks his peeps, he goes and asks the chief priest and all this kind of stuff, what are these fools talking about? What are they talking about, this Messiah? And what did they say to him?

They read now in Matthew 2, 5 through 8, in Bethlehem, in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written, but you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, are by no means least among the rulers of Judea, for out of you will come a ruler, who will shepherd by people Israel. Then Herod called the Magi secretly, why secretly? And found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He's like, did it appear when I was born? Nope. Okay then. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, please report it to me, so that I too may go and worship him. Yeah, right.

So here we have another observation. Scripture has the authority to help discern, and it ultimately is the guide for the Magi. The star guided them only to Jerusalem, so they were on the right track without divine guidance to their knowledge. They didn't know it was Yahweh who was leading them. They were just following a star. But now through Scripture, they have a map.

I want to speak a little direct and personal to you guys. You can try to convince yourself that you don't need to read Scripture, that you can get by on prayers, hymns and sermons. But if you are seeking the truth of God, why would you avoid Scripture? Why would we avoid Scripture? When it's so easily available to us, the Magi didn't have it. They had to have someone read it to them.

So here, it's clear that God was being revealed to the Gentiles. And what is Scripture in its simplest form? The revelation of God. It even ends in a book called Revelation. Two for two. Look at that.

Which brings us to our next observation. Scripture reveals who God is. If you are seeking truth, you must seek the Scriptures. That is why here at BelPres, we have been working on discipleship and on disciplines. And the way we have been learning to get into Scripture together is providing Bible reading plans with the sermon series. I think we've had two, maybe three. I think we're going to continue.

That way, not only do you hear sermon, but you have a reading plan to go along to connect Scripture with what is being said from a pulpit. We also, every Sunday at 930, in the upper campus, there is a Bible study that you can go to, led by Reverend Scott Mann. You can go to the Bible study and still make the 11 a.m. service.

As well in our community groups, our small groups, we ask them to be in the Word. Because also in this story of the Magi, what we also see is sin. It's not called out as sin, but what we see is sinful behavior.

King Herod is so power hungry, obsessed with his position, and paranoid that he lies to the Magi. Because I'm sure he really wanted to go and worship toddler Jesus. This is the same cat who had people test his food to make sure it wasn't poison, and who also killed one of his wives and their two sons.

This cat, that's why earlier in scripture, it says that all of Jerusalem was troubled, because this cat is what we call in this region of the world, a loose cannon. Now for those of you who don't know English phrases, let me use a universal sign of what a loose cannon means. This cat was loco, out of his mind.

That's why everybody was troubled. And the threat of a Messiah in the world was not something he was about to sit by and let happen.

Now we can look to King Herod and easily judge and point the finger at him, but I'm asking us today that another observation that we can gather from this is that our sinful nature rejects Christ. And we try to take measures to remove Jesus from our lives. This is the easiest way to avoid truth by trying to destroy it.

So question I have for us today, question I have for you today, where are you avoiding God's truth in your life? Where are you acting like King Herod right now? Where are we as a church community avoiding God's truth? Where are we acting like King Herod?

The difference between King Herod and us is that we can pray to the Lord to help us repent and change our ways, to help us make adjustments. I don't know what sin has a hold of you, but we can pray for conviction from the Holy Spirit to change our ways.

But this requires us to pray, and most likely prayer and fasting sometimes, which is another thing that we're doing here, as we have a whole prayer room, and we're calling for fasting, and to reintroduce that as a norm here at BelPres. We need to listen to God, seek God's truth like the Magi, because sometimes it's us that needs an Epiphany.

Moving on to Matthew 2, 9–12, it says, After they had heard Herod the King, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose, went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to King Herod, they returned to their country by another route, another way.

So here we have the conclusion of the story of the Magi, of their journey. They finally find the Christos, the Christ, the Messiah, the Messiah. They worship him because they have already met a king, but they now know that they have met a very different king, one who is worthy of their worship, the one, as followers of Christ, that we call the one and true king.

What gifts are you bringing to Christ? What gifts are you bringing worthy to worship the Lord? Some of those gifts, as we say, is our time, our treasures, and our influence.

Now the other thing that we can see here as well, this is a very important point here, is that Mary welcomes these strangers, the foreigners, the mystics, the astrologers, because although they were outsiders, they came seeking a king, a messiah.

So let's just be honest here for a second. We're human beings, I'm a sinful human being. We are to be welcoming all people, but in all honesty, we don't like all people. We all have our biases. We all have reasons why this person or that person is not welcome in the kingdom, but that is not our job.

A note for ourselves is all who are seeking Jesus, regardless of their background, regardless if you've decided that they should be here or not, is to further the kingdom. That means we are ushers to the kingdom, not bouncers, as one of my friends said.

Now we can call upon the Spirit to help us and discern how we engage, but regardless of how they are seeking Jesus, what path they came, our job for those of us who call King Lord, our job is to usher them.

And every once in a while, you might be called upon somebody to seek scripture to help them find their way. And so per the Magi's tradition and culture, they offer Jesus gifts worthy of a king. And then they have a dream.

God now speaks to them directly. No more stars, no more wicked kings, no more scholars to help them with scripture, to reveal God to them. Now God speaks to them directly. Just as Pastor Scott said a while ago, they came following a star, but they left following God.

And God tells them, turn away from the sinful king, and they go home a different way. Which brings us to our final observation. Once God has revealed himself to us, he leads us away from sin. This is our Epiphany today.

When we seek and find God, God guides us away from sin. I don't know what sin has anchors in you today, but as God reveals himself, God's nature is to pull you away from that. It might be painful, it might be hard, it might not happen all the same time, but that is the goodness of God. You don't have to stay in sin. The Lord delivers us from it.

And he says, all who seek him, we hear that in Matthew 7 and 8, it says, for everyone who asks, receives. The one who seeks finds, and the one who knocks, the door will be open. Are you knocking today?

Now, it's not a promise that our lives will be easy. That is a false gospel. That is what prosperity gospel promises. That, unfortunately, is heresy. Because you are not promised in the easy life. You are promised a life with God.

We don't know if this made the Magi's journey easier. We don't know if it made it longer. We don't know if it made it more treacherous. But what we do know is that God kept them away from a sinful and devouring king.

A king who later discovers the actions of the Magi, and in his rage calls for all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of two to be killed. That cat is loco.

Now, something is happening with our younger generations. Now, I don't want to conflate, you know, and get too excited of what's happening, but in the West, the US., Canada, and the UK., something is happening with our younger generations. It's around the world. It's a little different, but something in the West is happening.

And that is we're seeing a rise in our younger generations coming to faith and religion. Now, in general, what I have discovered is that what previous generations, like my generation and others, what previous generations have left for the younger generations isn't all that great. It's not fulfilling.

Some of the things that we said, just do this and do this and you'll get here, well, that this is no longer there. So where are they going? And it's not bringing fulfillment. And they're beginning or begin searching for a better purpose in life.

Now, this is different from the Magi who had strong beliefs in their culture and traditions. But our younger generations are starting to seek. And although may not be the traditional avenues of faith, they may find different ways to make it to Jesus. It doesn't matter. Per scripture, it's pretty clear that God can work with those who seek.

Amen? I heard a story from this cat, this 20-year-old cat from Canada, and who had gone back to church all on his own, right? No assistance from family or whatever, just went back to church on his own. And this is what he said at his time now in church for a while.

He said, for me, it was like searching for things like love, things like identity, purpose, stuff like that, that I couldn't really find elsewhere, whether it was through sports or grades or relationships.

That is a very different story that I've been accustomed to finding people alone in church. Now, this is my experience. This isn't universal, but just in my experience of ministry, when I usually find someone alone in church, it's usually a spouse who is missing their other spouse.

And most of the times, again, my experience, it's a woman. It's a wife and their husband isn't coming to church. And sometimes they have their kids, but sometimes, you know, their husband isn't around and coming to church. That has been my typical experience.

But what's happening now, what I've come across, is young people coming to the church all on their own, saying that nobody in my family has belief, but I'm looking, I'm seeking for something. I'm looking for Jesus. Can I do it here?

That's something that's new to me in the numbers that it's happening. All on their own, similar to what we have read here in Matthew. A group of Magi with no divine intervention that scripture gives us, they come seeking the Christ.

Our younger generations are seeking, and there are all kinds of truths out there, but God has given us a truth that saves, and we need to share that. The epiphany of the Magi is that God is for all people.

Before Jesus says it himself, before Paul goes and preach to the Gentiles, before Christianity gets to Rome, God works through these ancient mystics, these astrologers, to reveal through scripture where and who the Messiah is.

If you are seeking, if you are knocking on the door today, whether because it's your first time, or you're just learning about Jesus, or you're just coming back to the church, then can we, those of us who have been baptized, those of us who have been here, those of us who are reading scripture, can we say, we're here to help you. We're here to help you make the next steps.

Can we agree to that? Can we say amen?

If you are seeking, come and talk to a leader. Come to the Bible study. Come sign up for the next Alpha class whenever the dates come out. And if you don't have a Bible, we'll get you one. Amen?

Bow your heads with me.

Father in heaven, thank you so much, Lord, for your pursuant heart of us, Lord. Thank you so much for these Magi who came from a far off land that we don't understand, but they came for the same truth that we've looked for, Lord. Thank you for that.

When we knock on the door, Lord, you are always there to open it, Lord. Thank you that when we seek, we will find you, Lord. Thank you for loving us so much in your beautiful and your glorious name. And together we all said, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or community group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What are some key take aways for you?
- How might you respond this week?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Take the challenging parts of your conversation to Jesus. Thank God for the time together, the

Jan 4, 2026

conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.