**Astrologers Among Us** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Epiphany/Baptism of the Lord The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12 Saint Paul, Minnesota
January 7, 2024

Any *Call the Midwife* fans here this morning?

*Call the Midwife* is a [BBC](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC) period drama series about a group of nurse [midwives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midwife) working in the [East End of London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_End_of_London) in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The plot (in the early seasons) follows newly qualified midwife *Jenny Lee,* as well as the work of midwives and the nuns of [Nonnatus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Nonnatus%22%20%5Co%20%22Raymond%20Nonnatus) House, a nursing convent and part of an [Anglican religious order](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican_religious_order), coping with the medical problems in the deprived [Poplar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poplar%2C_London) district of London's desperately poor East End. The Sisters and midwives carry out many nursing duties across the community. However, with between 80 and 100 babies being born each month in Poplar alone, the primary work is to help bring safe childbirth to women in the area and to look after their countless newborns. And each season ends with a Holiday Special.

The most recent Holiday Special begins two weeks before Christmas with *Apollo 8* poised to circle the moon. The elderly Sister Monica Joan (increasingly frail and depressed) is convinced this could be her last Yuletide and decides she’ll not live to see man walk on the moon. The Nonnatus Family, including Trixie’s brother Geoffrey, decide something must be done to try and lighten her state of mind. What do they do? They recreate a *Tableau,* (much like House of Hope’s!) that Sister Monica Joan remembered from her childhood church—and its spectacular! The whole community pitches in to make it happen.

But Apollo 8, as depicted in the show, is what brought memories flooding back for me. Apollo 8 (December 21–27, 1968) was the first crewed [spacecraft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spacecraft) to leave [low Earth orbit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low_Earth_orbit) and the first [human spaceflight](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_spaceflight) to reach the [Moon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moon). The crew orbited the Moon ten times without landing, and then departed safely back to [Earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth). These three [astronauts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astronaut)—[*Frank Borman*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Borman)*,*[*James Lovell*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Lovell)*, and*[*William Anders*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Anders)*—*were the first humans to witness and photograph the far side of the Moon and an [*Earthrise*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earthrise)—the famous color [photograph](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photograph) of a *luminous, blue* [Earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth) and part of the [Moon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moon)'s bright illuminated surface (due to the radiance of the sun—our star) that was taken from [lunar orbit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lunar_orbit) by astronaut [William Anders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Anders) on December 24, 1968. Nature photographer [*Galen Rowell*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galen_Rowell) described it as *"the most influential environmental photograph ever taken.”*

I think this is interesting because bright, luminous light is a major theme in our Gospel reading from Matthew this morning.

You see, today in many parts of the Christian household we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany, and we hear in this passage from Matthew's Gospel--the story of wise men from the East searching out and finding the Christ Child. The word *'epiphany'* simply means *'showing'* or *'shining forth.'* Divine light shines forth from this Child.

But it should not so much be understood as the appearance of God as the transparence of God. The divine light that shines in the Child is not a foreign light to the earth. *It is the Light at the heart of all life.* *It is the Light from which all things come.* According to John Phillip Newell, if somehow this Light were extracted from the universe, everything would cease to exist. So this is a story about the Light at the heart of everything, the Light at the heart of you, the Light at the heart of me.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is important to understand because the wise men who come to pay their respects to Jesus may well have been astronomers, astrologers, or some other form of stargazer. Sometimes they are depicted with an astrolabe or some other piece of scientific equipment in addition to their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Such gifts further suggest status and wealth. Whereas we imagine barefoot shepherds making their way to Bethlehem, the Christian tradition made kings of these men.

Matthew says that they are *“from the East,”* though again tradition has intervened such that they are depicted as being from different parts of Asia, Africa, or Europe. Indeed, given that Jerusalem can be seen to be at the intersection of these three great continents, it is easy to understand how these three could come to represent the three portions of the known world coming together to pay homage to the newly born king of the Jews (indeed, the king of all the world).

There is, then, in this text for Epiphany the depiction of an *extraordinary hope:* the peoples of the earth coming together united in their recognition of what’s important, all offering gifts to the ruler of universe.

Reflecting on this truth, David Keck said: *“When I think of humanity getting its act together, overcoming differences, and working together for a better future, I think of*Star Trek*and its original producer, Gene Roddenberry. He realized that the casting of the crew of the*Enterprise*was a political statement, and so the bridge of the starship eventually depicted officers from different continents of the earth. Martin Luther King Jr. recognized the power of this. Nichelle Nichols, who played Lieutenant Uhura, was thinking of not returning for the second season of the show. King pointed out to her how important it was to see an African American helping to lead a spaceship.”*[[2]](#footnote-2)

This way of living, as we know, involves *risk.* But tragically we have often been given the impression that we have all the light we need, within our nation, within our religious tradition, within our cultural inheritance. But our Gospel story points to something radically different, that there is Light beyond our inherited boundaries, and that we need this Light, that it is given to complete the Light we have received, not to compete with the Light we have received. We need one another as nations and religions as much as the species of the Earth need one another to be whole.

This is significant because the Light that the wise men find is a *threat* to the most powerful man in Judea (Herod), because the Light that the wise men find is the Light at the heart of all life, not just of some life, not just of certain people.

John Phillip Newell is prescient once more, when he said: *“Any power structure that favors only some rather than serving all, all people, all life, is a false power. It has no ultimate future. It will collapse. And at some level false power knows this. It always feels threatened by the shining of true Power, the power of love. 'Love-Force,' as Mahatma Gandhi called it, 'Not Brute-Force.'”*[[3]](#footnote-3)

We don't know what happened to the wise men. But my sense is that they would never have regretted the risk they took, they would never have regretted crossing the boundaries of their homeland, they would never have regretted following a star.

I think the wise men in returning home saw everything more brightly. The Light they had found in a distant land turned out to be the Light at the heart of their own land. But now they saw it as if for the first time. They saw it as the Light within *all* life.

I am reminded of the story told by the prophet Nahum. It is the story of the burning bush in the Hebrew Scriptures in which Moses sees a bush on fire, but the bush is not consumed. Nahum says that the important thing about this story is *not* that the bush is burning but that Moses *notices,* because every bush is burning, every bush is on fire with the divine presence, everything in the universe shines because God is at the heart of it. So it is in our epiphany story. It is a story that invites us to open our eyes to the light that is everywhere.

Friends, the manifestation of God to the gentile nations represented by these Magi is something to celebrate, as is the human exploration of God’s creation. But the fact that the story of following a sign in the heavens also leads to the powers and principalities, to racism and murder, should not be too surprising. As the hymn *“We Three Kings”* reminds us, Jesus will receive not only the gold of royalty and the frankincense of deity but also the “bitter perfume” of the myrrh. Alleluias will *“sound through the earth and skies”* for the babe who will be all three—not just king of the cosmos, not just God of the universe, but also the revelation that a broken, fearful humanity desperately needs.[[4]](#footnote-4)

So, look around you now at the people next to you, at the life forms growing from the earth, at the radiance of the sun or the whiteness of the moon. And look also into your own heart. There in all things is the Light. Maybe it is deeply hidden under confusions or falseness. But it is there, waiting to come forth anew. In the Christ Child this Light shines. He is our epiphany, our showing. In him we see the Light of life.

1. John Phillip Newell, *The Light Within All Life,* Day 1, January 6, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Keck, *Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12,* The Christian Century, December 5, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Phillip Newell, *The Light Within All Life,* Day 1, January 6, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Keck, *Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12,* The Christian Century, December 5, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)