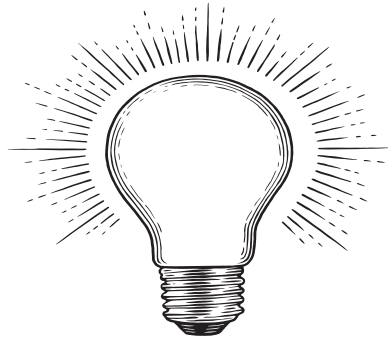


A glowing lightbulb is the central focus, emitting a warm yellow light. It is surrounded by vibrant, multi-colored paint splashes in shades of red, orange, blue, and purple. The splashes are dynamic and energetic, with some paint dripping down the sides of the bulb. The background is dark, making the lightbulb and the colorful splashes stand out prominently.

Everyday **Epiphanies**

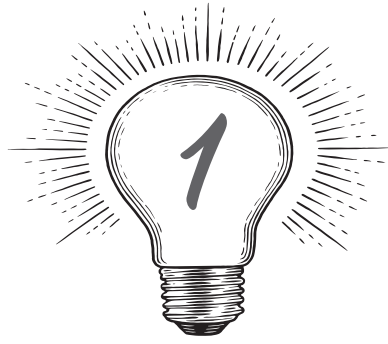
MEETING CHRIST IN THE
ORDINARY MOMENTS
OF LIFE

JAMES A. HARNISH



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CATCH LIGHT ON THE RUN

Matthew 2:1-12

I don't have the faintest idea how my GPS works. I'm totally baffled by the concept of a perfectly coordinated constellation of satellites that I will never find in the night sky but which find me wherever I am, pick up the direction I'm going, and set me on the best route to reach my destination. I still make wrong turns and get off course almost as often as I did in the old days, when my wife and I navigated with a paper map. Our marriage somehow survived the way she would fold the map back on itself while I insisted that it be folded neatly, the way we received it. It didn't help that in stereotypically misdirected male pride, I refused to ask for directions until we had no other option. I didn't want to confess that I needed help from someone who knew what I didn't know. GPS may have helped save our marriage!

I am even more flabbergasted when I imagine the way those satellites not only find and direct me but also are doing the same thing for millions of individuals all around the globe at the same time. GPS finds, knows, and leads the way for anyone anywhere who connects to the system and is open to its guidance. It's all a mind-bending mystery

to me, but I've learned to trust it. It's become an ordinary part of my life, and I wouldn't leave home without it.

OnStar is one of the best-known GPS systems. And it makes the comparison to the star-gazing magi in Matthew's enigmatic story too good to pass up. They are the leading actors in the opening scene of the Epiphany drama. Their story also describes the way the Epiphany of Christ happens in many of our lives. The extraordinary "revelation" or "uncovering" of the presence of Christ is not something we create or control. It is always a gift. Sometimes it comes as an utterly unexpected surprise. The magi, however, would suggest that more often, Epiphany happens for people who are prepared to see, willing to follow, and open to surprises along the way.

"We've seen his star." (Matthew 2:2)

Decades ago, I found (or was I found by?) a story that hooked my attention and has never let go. It provides the title of this chapter.

In 1914, a fourteen-year-old boy in San Francisco received a box camera in preparation for a trip to Yosemite National Park. That ordinary gift opened Ansel Adams's eyes to the beauty and majesty of our wilderness. It led him to become America's best-known nature photographer.

Adams's autobiography includes his account of the experience that resulted in his famous photograph "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico." The sun was setting when Adams caught a glimpse of the moon rising on the horizon. As he rushed to set up his camera, he shouted to his team, "Get that, for God's sake! We don't have much time!" When Richard Lacayo reviewed Adams's autobiography, he wrote, "Not much but enough for an artist of sublime sensibility to catch light on the run and keep it forever."¹

The magi didn't have much to go on, just a new star that caught their attention when they were gazing into the night sky. It wasn't much, but

it was enough to intrigue a few stargazers whose eyes had been trained to notice such things. They had a “sublime sensitivity to catch light on the run” and to follow it wherever it would lead them. You might say the star found them in the ordinary place of their ordinary lives and drew them to follow it in an extraordinary direction.

When it comes to their story, we don’t have much to go on either. Despite the beautiful traditions that have accumulated around twelve verses in the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, there’s more we don’t know than we do know. The story is filled with mystery.

We don’t know who they were. The Greek word *magoi* suggests priestly sages, astrologers, experts in studying the stars and interpreting dreams. Their identity as “kings” developed during the second century as the church told their story in the context of the Old Testament prophecy, “Nations shall come to your light, / and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60:3 NRSVue). An eighth-century Irish tradition imagined them as representatives of three stages of life: youth, middle age, and old age. Over time, they received racial characteristics representing Europe, Africa, and Asia—the three regions of the world known by inheritors of this tradition. They were assigned different names depending on the culture in which the story was passed on.

We don’t know exactly where they came from. “The East” is a big place! To borrow the name of a popular Broadway musical, they “come from away.” The point is that they were Gentiles, foreigners, outsiders to God’s covenant with the Hebrews.

We don’t know how many there were. The assumption that there were three of them is based on the gifts they brought. Various traditions suggest as few as two and as many as twelve.

We don’t know when they showed up. Despite the way we carefully position them with their camels around the manger, Matthew indicates

that they came to the “house” where Mary, Joseph, and the baby were staying (2:11). Herod’s infanticide of boys in Bethlehem younger than two years old suggests they arrived two years after Jesus’s birth.

We don’t even know if the story literally happened. Because there is no external record of the event, some biblical scholars believe Matthew’s Gospel includes the story for a theological rather than historical purpose.

The “eureka” moment for me in revisiting the story is how extravagantly inclusive it is. Matthew tracks the genealogy of Jesus back to Abraham, clearly rooting him in the Hebrew tradition. But the coming of the magi breaks through the boundary between Jew and Gentile. It stretches any narrow religious or ethnic assumptions to see the revelation of Christ in the light of the extravagantly expansive prophetic visions of the Old Testament.

*Let all the kings bow down before him;
let all the nations serve him.
Let it be so, because he delivers the needy who cry out,
the poor, and those who have no helper.*
(Psalm 72:11-12)

For Matthew, the coming of the magi sets in motion the drama that will reach its grand finale when, like the magi following the star, the disciples arrive at the mountain “to which Jesus had directed them.” You could call it GPS—God’s Positioning System. The story that begins with the surprising arrival of people who had no business being there concludes with Jesus’s radically inclusive commission to his disciples at the Ascension.

I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you.

(Matthew 28:18-20)

The magi set our spiritual GPS toward Pentecost, when people “from every nation under heaven” hear the good news “in their native languages” (Acts 2:5-6). They prepare the way for Peter’s epiphany that “God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another” (Acts 10:34). The star they followed lifts our eyes to imagine “a great crowd that no one could number...from every nation, tribe, people, and language...standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).

But I’ve rushed ahead of the story! The Mountain of the Ascension may be where Matthew’s Gospel will end, but it’s not where the story begins. It begins with the magi peering into the dark sky. Watching the stars was the ordinary pattern of their lives, just the way photography was the ordinary pattern of Ansel Adams’s life. Their eyes were prepared to “catch light on the run” when they saw it and rise to follow. These strange visitors portray the way many of our faith stories begin. We may not have much to go on, but we have enough to catch a glimpse of the light of Christ and follow where it leads us. That is, at least, the way it’s often been for me.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105 NRSVue)

I’ve never experienced the Epiphany as the sudden blaze of light like the one that knocked Saul off his horse on the Damascus road and blinded him for three days (Acts 9:1-9). I grew up hearing soul-stirring, evangelistic sermons about our individual need for a Damascus road experience. I looked for it, even prayed for it. If that’s your experience, I celebrate it with you. But I never experienced Saul’s identity-changing epiphany on the Damascus road.

I’ve experienced inspiring moments as I watched the changing shadows over the Great Smoky Mountains, when I saw the sun set over the Gulf of Mexico, or when I waited for the clouds to rise over

Table Mountain in Cape Town. I've been lifted beyond myself in the Spirit-soaked silence of the Washington National Cathedral, in singing around a youth campfire, or in the soaring melodies of powerful music. I've caught sight of the light of Christ in the twinkle in the eye of a baby being baptized and in the closing eyes of an aging saint. I've been challenged to more faithful discipleship by prophetic voices calling for freedom, justice, and peace.

I have not, however, borne witness to one instantaneously life-transforming epiphany that redirected my path in a different direction. The example of Paul's young protégé, Timothy, has been a liberating epiphany for me. There's no record that he experienced a blinding revelation of Christ. Instead, Paul told him to "rekindle the gift of God" he received from his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois (2 Timothy 1:6 NRSVue). Like Timothy, I received the gift of faith from my grandmother, Helena, my grandfather, Emerson, my mother, Randalyn, and my father, Sylvester. I can identify with John and Charles Wesley, who inherited the gift of faith from their parents, particularly their mother, Susanna. The Methodist movement was born when the spirit of God "rekindled" the fire of faith that was birthed within them in their childhood, nurtured by the Holy Club as students at Oxford, shattered by their failure as missionaries to Georgia, and enflamed by John Wesley's "heartwarming" epiphany at Aldersgate.

In the Wesleyan tradition, we call that gift prevenient grace. It's the undeserved grace of God that goes before our response and prepares us for the next step along the way. It's the love of God that finds us wherever we are but loves us too much to leave us there. It's the light of a star that leads us from where we are to the place we most deeply long to be.

The gift of faith I received from my parents and the church community in which I was raised prepared me for commitment services at summer youth camps and the altar calls at an old-fashioned camp

meeting. In one of those settings, we spread our blankets on the grass of a rolling hillside in central Pennsylvania. We ended each service by singing the same song each time as we made our way back down the hillside into the camp.

Follow I will follow Thee, my Lord,
Follow every passing day.²

The best I can say about my faith is that I've been following its path ever since those formative experiences. Sometimes I've followed it with more clarity than others. There have been twists, turns, and detours as well as unexpected discoveries. I made wrong turns that required redirection. I found wise traveling companions who encouraged, challenged, and guided me when I might have settled down in some comfortable way station along the path.

One of those wise friends introduced me to the work of William Stafford, the one-time United States poet laureate (1970–71). His poem “The Way It Is” has become one of the guideposts for my life. He describes an unchanging thread that you can follow through all the tests and trials of life. He offers the assurance, “While you hold it you can't get lost.... You don't ever let go of that thread.”³ Those early decisions to follow Christ became the thread I've followed. It is the star that has guided me all the way.

My observation is that when it comes to the faith, most of us some of the time and some of us most of the time are like the magi. We may not have much to go on. We may not have been blinded by the light, but what we have is enough for us to catch sight of the light of Christ. Living by faith involves taking the next appropriate step with the light we've seen as we keep watching for fresh epiphanies along the way. The psalmist described it as a light for our path. It's just enough light to show us the next step to follow.

A conversation in a college dorm room with a fellow student and a wise mentor became a model for me of the life of faith. My friend was struggling with his commitment to follow Christ. He asked, “How can I make a commitment when I don’t know everything it’s going to mean?” I still hear the voice of our “wise man” when he replied, “None of us know everything it is going to mean. But we know enough to make the commitment, and we spend the rest of our lives finding out what it will mean.” That conversation was nearly sixty years ago, but I’ve never improved on it. We sing it in John Greenleaf Whittier’s words:

In simple trust like theirs who heard
beside the Syrian sea
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow thee.⁴

“They asked, ‘Where is the newborn king of the Jews?’” (Matthew 2:2)

The magi were wise enough to know what they didn’t know. In contrast to my resistance to asking for directions, they were willing to acknowledge when they had reached the end of their knowledge and needed more wisdom to guide them through the unknown present toward a hoped-for future.

The unknown is a tough place to be. I’ve never known anyone who enjoyed feeling lost, confused, or disoriented. It’s frightening to feel our loss of control. In our strongly individualized culture, we’d rather sing with Frank Sinatra, “I did it my way.” By contrast, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams encourages us to “quarry through moments of strangeness and even disorientation...those moments when we don’t quite know what is going on or what is happening in us.” He calls us to “allow our unknowing to lead us to a place of deeper knowing.”⁵ When we find ourselves in those strange places, wise people

search for deeper wisdom beyond their own. They ask for directions from others who have followed the star before them.

On one hand, there is a naive simplicity in the decision of the magi to go to the obvious place to ask for directions. They headed directly for King Herod's court in Jerusalem. If they were looking for the King of the Jews, what better place could they go to find him?

On the other hand, I'm struck by their courage in going to Herod. Kings, autocrats, and dictators in every age do not take kindly to anyone who threatens their power. The magi must have heard about the way Herod rid himself of anyone who threatened his reign, including members of his own family. As we will see later, it's an understatement for Matthew to say Herod was "troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him" (Matthew 2:3). Even Herod knew enough to know what he didn't know. He knew enough to turn to the Hebrew scriptures, which were evidently an unfamiliar source of wisdom for him. He called on scholars who searched in the past to find direction for the future. They found it in the tradition going all the way back to David and expressed by the prophet Micah.

*As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
though you are the least significant of Judah's forces,
one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out
from you.
His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.*

(Micah 5:2)

If we're watching for the Epiphany of Christ, how would we know if we experienced it? The only way to identify the Epiphany of Christ is to experience it in ways that are consistent with the prophetic promises of the written word and the gospel witness of the Word made flesh in Jesus. We train our eyes to recognize the Epiphany as we live into the words of scripture and practice the spiritual disciplines of worship and prayer. We learn to see Christ by seeing how others have seen him across the long history of the faith.

Don't miss this. The magi and Herod read the same scripture. The magi were looking for the newborn king to honor him. Herod read the same texts to destroy him. It's a painful reminder that the Bible can be used to defend just about anything anyone intends to do. I'm writing in a time of profound social and political polarization. Some of the loudest voices in the American culture come from leaders who claim to hold a "biblical worldview." Oddly enough, that understanding often ends up being a version of Christian nationalism that is disturbingly consistent with a white, patriarchal, nationalistic way of seeing the world. It's a heretical worldview that fails to see the prophets' calls for justice for the poor or welcome for immigrants. It misses the pervasive biblical theme of caring for the creation. It glosses over some of the most disturbing words from Jesus and leaps past the Sermon on the Mount. The people who insist on posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms never suggest posting the Beatitudes.

If we're looking for the Epiphany of Christ, we'll recognize it when we find something that looks like the Word that became flesh in Jesus becoming flesh in the lives of ordinary people in ordinary places. It will look like the answer to our prayer that God's kingdom, as defined by the will, words, and way of Jesus, will come on earth as it is already fulfilled in heaven. It will be a way of living that produces "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Herod and the magi found the direction they needed, but they found it for radically different purposes. The violence that lurks in the shadow of Herod's attempt to manipulate the magi will be uncovered in the ghastly story that follows. Matthew frames the gospel in the context of the ongoing tension between the ruling powers of this world and coming of the kingdom of God. That tension will eventually nail the king the magi sought to a cross.

Epiphanies are everywhere.

In *Everyday Epiphanies*, Jim Harnish weaves together Scripture, story, history, poetry, and cinema to summon and guide us to pay attention to our lives, experiences, creation, the people around us, trusting that what we need for the living of our days has already been made available to us. This is a book full of wisdom from one who has “gained a wise heart” by paying attention.

—**Gregory Palmer**, Executive Secretary, Council of Bishops, The United Methodist Church

Jim Harnish's new book, *Everyday Epiphanies*, is an invitation to wonder, faith, and revelation. Jim helps us find glimpses of goodness and glory hidden in ordinary, even mundane, moments. God is in dark gardens and smelly stables, not just on sunny mountaintops and synagogues. God can be found, if you keep your eyes and heart open, in the quiet moments of the everyday.

—**Christine Parton Burkett**, Consulting Faculty, Duke Divinity School

Too often, we think of the season between Advent and Lent as merely a pause to catch our breath between Christmas and Easter. But Jim Harnish's latest book reminds us that Epiphany is itself full of wondrous possibility. In recalling the stories between Christ's birth and the start of his public ministry, we discover that God's capacity to surprise us takes no such pause. We just need to open our eyes and our hearts to experience the splendor of grace, every day.

—**Magrey R. deVega**, Senior Pastor of Hyde Park United Methodist Church in Tampa, Florida, and author of *Questions Jesus Asked* and *The Christmas Letters*

Get ready to soak in these rich biblical texts, which will lead you to surprising moments of epiphany awe. Practicing spiritual disciplines help prepare us to be startled by God's light, which appears unbidden on our path. In reading and reflecting on Epiphany, I found myself continually singing, “Tune thy heart to sing thy grace,” from the famous hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.”

—**Charlene P. Kammerer**, Bishop, The United Methodist Church, retired



Rev. Dr. James A. Harnish retired after forty-three years of pastoral ministry in the Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. He was the founding pastor of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Orlando and served for twenty-two years as the senior pastor of Hyde Park United Methodist Church in Tampa. He is the author of *A Disciple's Heart: Growing in Love and Grace*; *Earn. Save. Give.*; *Wesley's Simple Rules for Money*; and *Make a Difference: Following Your Passion and Finding Your Place to Serve*. He was a consulting editor for *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* and a contributor

to *The Wesley Study Bible*. He and his wife, Martha, have two married daughters and five grandchildren in Florida and South Carolina.

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