
MANIFESTING GOD

MATTHEW 2:1-12

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 2024

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I wonder if you've come across what seems to be a newish fad among celebrity types that's really spiked in popularity since about March 2020. It's a practice called manifesting. Manifesting is essentially people believing they have the power to make something materialize because they willed it to be so. It's somewhat different than the practice of imagining yourself in a situation over and over to prepare yourself if that ever happens, like people do when they are preparing for a hoped for job interview or imagining standing at the free throw line with no time left on the clock and a chance to win the game. (Maybe that's just what kids like me who grow up in Indiana spend their time visualizing but I digress.) The idea of manifesting is rooted in the belief that a person's visualizing of a specific situation or thing actually makes it happen—a sort of willing something into existence.

Recently, I came across a reel on social media of a movie star sharing his account of his rise to fame. In the conversation he said, "I'm a huge visualizer and manifester." You see, when he was in second grade, he had a teacher who told him that when she wanted something she would pray to the Virgin Mary and ask Mary to ask God to give that thing to her. According to the teacher, she would promise something in return and get whatever she wanted. So this actor tried it. He went home and prayed for a bike, and two weeks later he won a bike from a drawing that his friend had entered him in. Based on that experience, he has continued doing this "manifesting" all the way to earning 10 million per film at the height of his career.

Now there is plenty to critique about a belief system that imagines human desire and aspirational thinking to be powerful enough to make things appear or happen just through thinking them. And there's plenty to wonder about for the effectiveness of manifesting given all those people who've spent their whole lives willing to have just enough to stay fed and sheltered but remain hungry and unhoused. There's also much to question about prayers that treat God like a cosmic vending machine where you put in some promised good action and God returns it with whatever you want. Though there isn't much place in Christian practice for the kind of manifesting popularized by celebrities and social media stars, there is plenty of room for considering how a different kind of manifesting plays into the story of Jesus and our life as disciples. In fact, on this Epiphany Sunday, we just might take a cue from the meteoric rise in popularity of manifesting and spend some time celebrating it. Afterall, epiphany means an appearing, a revealing, a sudden insight, or a manifestation.

The story we recall each year on Epiphany is Matthew's story of the appearing of a star and the revelation of Jesus as the King of the Jews and the savior of all people. As Matthew tells the story, Jesus had been born in the time of King Herod in a place called Bethlehem. Matthew's emphasis on this place and this time set the scene for the dramatic collision of power that happens in this story. Jesus, the one born King of the Jews, comes as a social, political, and religious challenge to the status quo of Herod's rule and the Roman Empire's reign. This child king was born in a place outside of the center of religious and social power that Jerusalem represented. Nevertheless, Matthew tells us that a group of strangers, some foreign sojourners went to Jerusalem seeking this child king in order to worship him. The magi served as scientists of the

supernatural in their Persian homeland. They studied the stars and interpreted meaning from what they observed. In this case, they observed a bright star rising and the revelation they discerned was that a new king had been born. When they showed up on the doorstep of the Jerusalem elite to ask the whereabouts of this child, King Herod and all the people with him were, as the youth might say, shook—they were disrupted to their core.

As the story goes, King Herod started acting the way most powerful people do when they feel threatened. First, he publicly called his advisors together to ask where the Messiah was supposed to be born. The priests and scribes looked to their knowledge of the sacred texts, to the scriptures, and shared what had been foretold—Bethlehem was to be the place from where their shepherding ruler would come. Acting in public to learn this location was not enough for Herod, so he made a second inquiry, but this one was in secret. Isn't it just like people who feel threatened and are trying to stay in power—whether that is in their personal lives or on a political stage—to act in secret, behind closed doors, hidden from the light of truth? Herod asked the magi to tell him the exact time when the star had appeared. He was intent on using whatever means were available to root out this threat to his power and authority. So, he sent the magi to Bethlehem hoping they would be his unwitting spies. Of course, he covered it with feigned good intention saying he wanted to bow his knee in worship of this new King, too.

Working with this information and continuing to follow the star, the magi journeyed to Bethlehem. And when the star stopped, this group of magi rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. They had found the Christ-child, this newborn king. These studiers of the stars had a revelation given to them: the true King was revealed to them, and their response was joy, worship, and offering gifts. When it was time for them to return home, the magi had another revelation—this one through a dream—and they decided to go home by another way. It's no wonder the magi have often been referred to as wise. Not only did they recognize signs that revealed the Messiah, but they also were wise to the schemes of a power-hungry leader trying to use them for evil. Having bent their knees in worshipful submission to King Jesus, the magi went home rather than to Herod.

I do wonder, on this day we're celebrating the Epiphany, the manifestation of Jesus as the Messiah, the King of the Jews, the savior of the world, what might this story ancient and new be revealing to us as we enter 2024? Perhaps given all this talk of manifesting we might want to say this story is manifesting a manifesting God. Or to put it another way, this story shows us that our lives are manifesting our manifesting God. Let me break that down a bit.

First, let's consider that the God revealed in Jesus is a manifesting God. Of course, we can think of this in the popularized understanding of manifesting. God is the only one who, properly speaking, through will and word, through holy imagining and divine desire, can make something come into being or existence out of nothing. But even more than this, our God is one who reveals who God is to humankind in and through Jesus. While God's mysteries are infinite and the depths for understanding God are limitless, God seems to delight in showing us more and more of who God is. This story of our manifesting God also reveals that God shows up and is present in people, and places, and spaces that are politically obscure, socially marginalized, and outside of our typical expectations. Throughout his Gospel story, but especially in this story about the magi's journey, Matthew repeatedly emphasizes how God's King Jesus shows up in weakness, vulnerability, and social, political, and religious dislocation. Through this scriptural story, God reveals that while many will go to places of power and might to find something or someone worth worshiping, that's not where we're most likely to find Jesus. Finally, God shows in this story that God will be revealed

in ways both old and new—through scripture, through stars, through whatever it is we study or know. The truth is, God is likely to be made known to us if we are simply paying attention. God is free to give those we might think of as religious outsiders access to God’s revelation of Jesus, so we should not be too quick to write off the wisdom of God we can learn from people of other faiths or no faith at all. It seems that God so wants to be revealed to us that God will use any means necessary.

So I wonder, what is our manifesting God wanting to reveal to you? What are you needing to see or know or experience of God in this day or week or year? I wonder if you’re needing to encounter God in the lowly and abandoned places of your life, where there seems only to be weakness, and vulnerability, and powerlessness. The good news of Epiphany is the manifesting God is manifest there. I wonder if you’re needing Jesus to be revealed to you in this time so often ruled by corrupt and fearful leaders who, like Herod, believe the best solution to their feelings of fear or loss of power is to enact violence on the vulnerable. The good news of Epiphany is the manifesting God is manifest even in this time. I wonder if you feel like you’ve spent years searching through all your best religious resources trying to know Jesus more, and you’re needing God to show you something more of who Christ is in a new way today. The good news of Epiphany is the manifesting God will be manifest even in what’s new and from unexpected outsiders. Our manifesting God desires to make Jesus known to you more and more wherever you find yourself.

The manifesting does not stop with what God reveals. Our lives are manifesting our manifesting God, or more simply, our lives are manifesting God. This is to say, we make Jesus known in the world. While the church collectively and we individually are not the only way God is revealed in the world, like it or not we are showing the world who Jesus is. Thankfully, this story provides some ideas of how we might be manifestations of Christ, how Jesus might be revealed through us. The first example I’ll highlight is a counterexample: the opposite of what we should follow. Perhaps Herod is a foil for some all-too-common ways we approach the revelation of Jesus in our brokenness and sin. When Herod receives the revelation about Jesus, he immediately recognizes that this is a disruption to his status quo, a disturbance to his ways of ruling and being in power, a subordinating of his own will and desire to that of God’s. He receives the news of Jesus as a threat, and he is terrified by it. Herod commands the resources at his disposal, acts in secret, and lies about his intentions all in an effort to remove this threat. And finally, when his plans fail, he resorts to wholesale destruction and violence.

While it is so easy to look around and point fingers at the Herods of our time, we must not be too quick to overlook the very Herod-like tendencies in ourselves. How often, as we recognize the truth that God’s ways are not our ways and that following Jesus means submitting our desires and wills to his, do we recoil in fear, resort to lying and deceit, and sometimes use any means at our disposal to resist Jesus being king of our lives? How often, in an effort to maintain power, or wealth, or social privilege, do we as individuals and the church cozy up to political power, compromise our calling to love all, and exploit the most vulnerable of people and creation? Lord have mercy on us as a church when our desire for power and wealth keeps us from manifesting who Jesus truly is.

Let’s not stop with this negative example. The Magi, though not Christian disciples by any typical definition, demonstrate how we may manifest our manifesting God. The Magi look for revelation in what they know, and God meets them there. While they go to the places of power and privilege looking for the King, they do not stop there in search for where God appears in the

world. The magi respond by following what was revealed to them, rejoicing with exceeding joy, bowing their knee in worship, and giving their most precious gifts when they found what they were searching for. Finally, though they were offered an opportunity to join the religious and political elite by returning with information about Jesus, they took another way home. The Magi manifest Jesus with joy, worship, giving gifts, and avoiding the enticement of power.

If the world ever needed a church or Christians to manifest Jesus in the way these Magi did, it surely is now. I wonder what would happen if this election year instead of being known for being on the right or the left, or simply for being pawns for political parties to maneuver, we Christians, like the magi, were known for finding and making Jesus known in the spaces where the vulnerable and powerless dwell. What if instead of being known for reacting in fear of strangers and outsiders, we were known for embracing God's revelation in whatever manner it came? What if the church was known more for who it kneels to in worships, than who it knocks on their knees by judging and excluding them? What if we were known for our exceeding joy rather than simply for what or who we are against? What if we were known for the extravagant gifts we give to the vulnerable instead of the extravagance we grab for ourselves? What if the church acted a little more like magi this year?

I think I know the answer. We would be known as true manifesters: manifesting our manifesting God. We would be living Epiphany—revealing Jesus to everyone we encounter. So, church, get on with your manifesting. God's at work willing us to make Jesus known in our world. And the world is waiting to see what we show them. Amen.