

Epiphany

January 4, 2026

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The Collect of the Day for this morning has a very new year, new-agey vibe to it that feels very appropriate to this first Sunday in the new year: “O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth”

Way to go God! You set out to bring wholeness to the world through your only Son, Jesus, and you manifested it! Way to go!

What will you manifest this year?

Of course, the collect of the day uses the word “manifest” today not because of a New Year’s resolution rather because today is Epiphany which means “manifest” and it’s the day we celebrate that God did indeed manifest love and wholeness in Jesus and that it was attested to by a group of outsiders called the Magi

To many, the story of Epiphany with the three Magi following the star all the way to the baby Jesus is the end of the Christmas story

But it is not the end of a story, it is a beginning – today’s celebration of Epiphany draws us into the season of Epiphany over which time we will hear many different stories that point to Jesus as the manifestation of God’s love – the proof, for lack of a better word, that Jesus is indeed the savior sent by God

If this were a seminary class or even an adult ed class on the gospel of Matthew, I might spend time expounding on this great Epiphany story and how it manifests God’s saving act in the world by...

...contrasting Herod the Great, the much-feared tyrant who ruled at the behest of Mark Anthony of Rome, and Jesus the Messiah, whose style of leadership is compared more to a shepherd than that of a king

...or juxtaposing Rome and Jerusalem and Bethlehem and the significance of Jesus being born in a manger in the city of David and being killed in the city of politics

...or contrasting the Magi, outsiders, the number of them is actually unknown, who likely came from further east and who looked to the celestial heavens for meaning and guidance and who were willing to cross borders to find the manifestation of God, to the chief priests and scribes, selected by the king, who looked for scripture that affirmed the borders and boundaries of their employer

All interesting lectures and some even with seeds for a good sermon

But, I'm a little too fixated on another character that plays a crucial role in this story: the star

“they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.” (vs. 9)

Not an unfamiliar character in this narrative, especially to some of us who when we were wee ones may have played the star in our church's pageants

But still, a passive character without whom this story could not move forward

This star has captured our attention and has been depicted in beautiful paintings, mosaics and tapestries, it is the theme of poems and hymns

Our Christmas tree at home is adorned with a star on the top – a reminder of the star that led the Magi to the baby Jesus

Scholars through the centuries have tried to make sense of this cosmic sign and “have proposed that it could be a comet, a supernova, a particular constellation, or another celestial body”<sup>1</sup> but there are no other stories or depictions or tellings of a spectacular celestial occurrence at this time outside of Matthew’s gospel

But, it was not uncommon for people in Matthew’s day and earlier to ascribe meaning to such things

Sebastien Doane notes in his commentary on this text, that “In antiquity, cosmic phenomena were often read as signals of significant human events; for example, Augustus interpreted a shooting star marking Julius Caesar’s death as also signaling his own political ascendancy.”

The Jewish prophets and the composers of the psalms often point to the natural world as tellers of truths and symbols of our relationship to God both when we are aligned and connected to God and when we are distant from God

It is not out of the ordinary, nor out of the question, that a star, “part of creation, [would] participate in divine revelation.”<sup>2</sup>

The star joins the ranks of John the Baptist, Joseph Jesus’ father, and even Mary his mother – all important characters in Matthew’s gospel who we’ve met so far whose job is not to be the focus of our story, but to help point to the one who is our focus – the manifestation of God: Jesus

The star participates in the divine revelation, the manifestation

It is a sign, a symbol, that, though it may not be easy for you to see, the manifestation of God’s radical love for creation is here!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.salalandcedar.com/wildlectionary/2026-1-epiphany>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

though it may not be immediately in front of you – though there may be a million other stories, truths, troubles, conflicts, realities that feel like they're in front of you and get in your way and take up your time – the star points to the manifestation of God's radical love for creation and reminds us it is here!

The star led the Magi over long distances finally into the presence of Immanuel, God with us – and the star points us to this day to the manifestation of God's love on earth

The star points to the manifestation of the truth of God's love – which is that God's love is not embodied or enacted through the whims of a tyrant but through expressions of love and service to neighbors by a shepherd and his faithful friends

The star, revealed to outcasts and outsiders, calls us forward to transgress borders and boundaries for the sake of finding God's kingdom while it is ignored by religious insiders who look to scripture and tradition only to bolster the empire

The star testifies to the power of love over the love of power

The star points to that kind of manifestation of God's radical love and grace and truth

I could sure use a star like that in my life right now

Something I could look at that would point me to that kind of manifestation in my life – to know that there is something worth striving for, searching for, advocating for, living for because it is manifest in the world if we can but grab hold of it

I could sure use a star like that in my life, couldn't you?

Well, aren't we lucky that there are stars all around us this morning

Thanks to Lin Peyton and her daughter Stephanie, we are surrounded by paper stars that decorate our windows...and they are for you

If you are so moved, you are invited to take one home for yourself or your family and hang it somewhere where you will see it

I know many of us might soon be taking down our Christmas decorations – or perhaps they're already down – and these signs and symbols that help remind us that Jesus came into our world as a baby in a manger will be put back in boxes until next year

But we need reminders, don't we? That the manifestation of God's love is still present on this earth, in our lives, in our midst?

We need the reminder that love has come and never will leave us and that it prevails over evil

The star points to the manifestation of that kind of love

We need the reminder that the one Mary sang about who would bring down the powerful from their thrones, lift up the lowly, and fill the hungry with good things (Luke 1:52-53) has come to earth and is in our midst

The star points to the manifestation of that kind of justice

We need the reminder that God's power is the power of community and the power of kindness

The star points to the manifestation of that kind of power

It is here, it exists, it is manifest in this world if we but seek it – and we will know it by its star

So, if you'd like, after the service this morning, take a star! Hang it where you will see and be reminded that God's love, God's mercy, God's justice, God's grace is here – even if you can't see it, it is here

To grab hold of it may require us to transgress some boundaries and borders, it may put us head to head with the powers of empire and capitalism, it may be revealed to us by those we would least expect to hear it from but, lest we forget, the star reminds us it is manifest

I don't know if you seek to manifest anything in this new year, but perhaps it can be to join me in manifesting this love, this power, this kindness, this hope, this grace

And the star leads us. Amen.