

*Isa. 60:1–6*  
*Ps. 72:1–7, 10–14*  
*Eph. 3:1–12*  
*Matt. 2:1–12*

## Guiding Lights

**Goal for the Session**      *On this day of Epiphany, adults will identify lights they follow that lead toward the God revealed through Jesus.*

### ■ P R E P A R I N G   F O R   T H E   S E S S I O N

## Focus on Matthew 2:1–12

### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Paul J. Achtemeier

The account of the magi announces at the beginning of Matthew’s story of Jesus that he is the king of the Jews (v. 2), the Christ (v. 4), and the promised ruler of Israel (v. 6). The assembling of the Sanhedrin here anticipates such action on the part of Jesus’ enemies at the time of his passion (26:3, 57; 27:17, 27, 62) and serves with the Great Commission (28:16–20) to bracket the story of Jesus with the acknowledgment of his universal import. Astrologers from a foreign land are the first to acknowledge Jesus as God’s anointed king, and the final command of the risen Jesus is to carry the gospel to all nations, including them via baptism into God’s new chosen people.

### WHERE is God in these words?

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In the Gospel of Matthew discipleship is often likened to a kind of shining, which recalls the light from the star that shined on the Christ child. Jesus tells his disciples, “You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:14, 16). That disciples are called to shine is important to remember in the season of Epiphany, for now that Christ has ascended and the Spirit has been given, we are the ones through whom this light shines forth.

### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Stephen Bauman

Everyone who happens to worship on Epiphany has their own idiosyncratic story to tell concerning their pathway to the manger. Some may have no idea who lies there. Others have mistaken ideas about the swaddled child. Nevertheless, all are present due to the prompting of God, who initiates our asking, our seeking, and our finding. The magi’s journey to Bethlehem exposes God’s intention to welcome everyone “into the joy of [God’s] home not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens,” and, remarkably, on earth as well.

### NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara Brown Taylor

Preachers will ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten them, helping them recall the ordinary and extraordinary ways in which the light of Christ has appeared to them in their own lives and the lives of those they love. They might also think of four or five people they would like to ask the same question: by what light do you see God? The church has a word for this. When we tell the stories of our encounters with God—in community, in nature, in relationship, in the chambers of our own hearts—we give testimony to the ongoing revelation of the Word made flesh.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

*Matthew 2:1–12*

## Focus on Your Teaching

What, and who, might the adults in your group turn to for guidance in daily life? All manner of potential sources are out there—valued friends, mass media, preachers, daily horoscopes, and advertising—that tells us what we “need” in order to be happy, attractive, or “in.” But not all such “lights” are of equal value, nor are they always (often?) congruent with the gospel. The participants in this group seek lights to guide. Today’s text offers an opportunity to consider sources of guidance and light that lead us Godward.

*Guide me in this day, O God, with light that truly reveals you, for the sake of my following you. Amen.*

### YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- bench or small table and white cloth
- cake pan with sand, small white candles (at least one per person), lighter, pens
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for January 13, 2019

### For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 1, 2; pens
- option 2: Resource Sheet 1

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*In advance of the session*, cover a bench or table with the white cloth. Put about an inch of sand in a cake pan and stand candles up in the sand. Set this on the cloth.

Welcome adults and introduce any guests or visitors. Have adults silently consider a difficult decision they have had to make and who they turned to for guidance in the matter. Without identifying the decision, have adults call out these sources of guidance.

Invite adults to silently identify the most important source of guidance for them. Ask:

✠ What leads you to trust and follow the guidance that source provides?

Offer these or similar words of prayer:

*God of light, guide us in the words and activities of this session to deepen our understanding, and encourage our following, of the ways you would have us travel, and the light you would have us reveal. In Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### EXPLORING

Note that today marks the beginning of the season after Epiphany (also called Ordinary Time) in the church year. Invite participants to relate their understandings of this season, and any ways your church might mark Epiphany. If not identified already, use the definition in the sidebar as a springboard to discuss what “revelings” they associate with Epiphany.

Use the following quote to introduce today’s focus scripture:

“Today’s text from Matthew offers a rare opportunity to rescue the magi from their fixed places in the annual Christmas pageant and restore them to their Biblical roles as key witnesses to both the threat and promise of the Christ Child.”

—Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year C*, vol. 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 213.



# FEASTING on the WORD

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## CURRICULUM

### Guiding Lights

*Epiphany* comes from a Greek word meaning “reveal” or “manifest.” *Magi*, the root of the English word “magic,” originally referred not to kings but astrologers who studied the stars to interpret events. Babylon was the ancient center of the magi.

Ask adults for a show of hands as to how many of them used a crèche (nativity set) at home as part of their Christmas decorations. Discuss:

- ✧ When did you put baby Jesus into it?
- ✧ Did you place the magi by the manger?

Use the second question to discuss why removing the manger might better illustrate the season after Epiphany and the passage of time suggested in Matthew 2:16.

Sometimes stories of great familiarity require a “wake-up” reading, so that participants can hear it with openness to elements otherwise lost in assumptions of “heard it all before.” In that light: explain the following group “sound effects” to be used during the reading of Matthew 2:1–12, noting it is similar to the ways Jews read the story of Esther during the festival of Purim. Whenever King Herod appears (by name or “he”), participants are to boo and stomp their feet. Whenever the child is mentioned (whether as “Jesus” or “child” or “Messiah” or “shepherd”), participants are to cheer and applaud. Whenever the magi appear (by name or “they”), participants are to say: “Ahh-haa!”

Carry out the reading. Afterwards, discuss the experience of pairing the text with the sound effects—in particular, how the back and forth related the contrast of Herod and the child, and the choices facing the magi regarding both “kings.” Invite general comments or questions about the passage.

Form two groups. Have one group identify with Herod, the other with the magi. Ask each group to discuss the following questions, and report back their views to the whole group:

- ✧ What serves as “light” for your character(s) in this story? That is, what values or purposes guide their words, actions, and intents? Hint: look for more than one source of light for your character(s).
- ✧ For each of those “lights,” what trust is required for your character(s) to follow that light?

Carry out the small group work, then gather the group as a whole for the reports. Have a volunteer read the following story about the death of the innocents in Matthew 2:16–17. Ask what light it sheds—or questions it raises—about the words and actions of all the characters in the focus scripture.

Recall that the lectionary assigns this story to the celebration of Epiphany. As a group, name the sorts of “revealings” that take place in and through the story:

- ✧ about the place of outsiders (Gentiles) in the gospel?
- ✧ about the power of fear?
- ✧ about God?

Read the “Where?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Pay particular attention to the idea of discipleship as “shining”—and the call at the end for us to be “the ones through whom this light shines forth.” Ask:

EASY  
PREP

- ✦ Besides the star, what lights shine through the words and actions narrated in the focus scripture?
- ✦ In what ways might those lights guide our own following of Jesus in this day?

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. The Lights We Follow** All of us rely on “light” shed by others to find our way to God. Read the “Now What?” excerpt. Focus on the question: “by what light do you see God?” Invite adults to silently ask that question of themselves: what and who serve as the “lights” by which you see God? Distribute Resource Sheet 2. Follow its directions for identifying those who serve as lights for us. Encourage adults to use this sheet throughout the season after Epiphany as a reminder of our sources of light.
- 2. You Are the Light** Following God bids us to serve as light for others. Read the “Where?” excerpt, and discuss ways in which participants can serve as “lights” as disciples of Jesus. Focus this conversation by having each adult consider one or more individuals who may be in need of light. Identify one specific action they can take this week to bring such light. You might also consider the implications of our calling to be light for the “world.” Talk about how participants, or the group as a whole, could take some action that brings a corporate witness to light your wider community and the world.
- 3. On Not Following “Herod”** The value of light is heightened by the presence of darkness. In Matthew, Herod casts a long shadow that results in the death of innocents (Matthew 2:16–17). As the magi did not follow Herod’s orders, discuss ways in which our call to follow light that leads to God brings us into conflict with paths that lead to violence and death. Ask: What might this season of Epiphany reveal about discipleship as a willingness to dissent as well as to follow?

## CLOSING

Gather around the pan with the candles. Invite adults to consider what “light” this session has shed on the meaning and celebration of Epiphany.

Call attention to the candles. Explain the closing ritual: Each person will light a candle as they name a particular light on their faith journey (if you did Responding option 1, adults could choose one of those lights). After each candle is lit, lead the group in the following response: “For light that guides, we give you thanks.” Practice the response, and then carry out the ritual. When all adults have lit a candle, observe a moment of silence and then offer this benediction: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Go now, and walk in the light of Christ.”

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for January 13, 2019, or e-mail it to the participants early in the week to allow time for reading and reflection.

Use enough sand in the pan so that candles can be placed into the sand and stand upright. Light your candle with the lighter first, then have others light their candles off of yours or another.

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January 6, 2019  
Guiding Lights

Adult  
Resource Sheet 2

## The Lights We Follow

On both sides of this lighthouse, identify lights you follow in your journey of faith. Examples of lights might include persons, books, experiences, or other sources.

