

Message: “They Were Troubled”

God’s Spirit works in mysterious ways.

Dr. Sharon Rawlette had an experience that changed the course of her career, and her life. She was on a weekend getaway with a college friend. In the weeks leading up to the trip, she’d been thinking about another friend who lived in France. They’d fallen out of touch years ago, but for some reason this person was on her mind.¹

Sharon wondered if she should reach out, but it was complicated, so she decided not to. During the trip, Sharon and her college friend were looking for a grocery store. Her friend used her phone to find the nearest one, then handed the phone to Sharon to read. But when the map popped up, it wasn’t showing local grocery stores. It was showing grocery stores in Carhaix, France.

Sharon’s friend didn’t live in Carhaix. Didn’t even visit often, as far as she knew. Still, it was too strange to ignore. So, when Sharon returned from her trip she sent an email. Her friend was happy to hear from her. As they caught up, her friend told her about their recent trip to ... Carhaix! Accounting for the time difference, her friend was visiting at the same moment the phone showed directions to the store.

But the story doesn’t end there. As a scientist, Dr. Rawlette was intrigued. She wanted to know more about her strange experience. Was it random chance, or was it something more? She spent the next five years collecting accounts and reviewing research on coincidences.

She wanted to know, what tips the scale from serendipity to something ordained? Sharon found the events she studied were both highly improbable and highly significant. In some cases, she found the odds, an improbable event occurred and had significance to the one experiencing it, were astronomical. So unlikely, it appears to point to a divine force working behind the scenes, like God’s divine grace.

The probability or improbability can be calculated mathematically. Each situation is unique, but Dr. Rawlette did the math. What she found is eye-opening, but not surprising to people of faith.

¹ <https://guideposts.org/angels-and-miracles/miracles/gods-grace/the-probability-and-significance-of-coincidences/>

Here's an example of how it works. Let's say you're thinking of calling a friend, but you keep putting it off. Then you happen to play a board game with your family. Each turn in the game requires you to roll the dice seven times. During one of your turns, you realize, when put together, your rolls add up exactly to your friend's phone number.

Incredible, right? Sharon calculates the probability of any combination of numbers on seven dice rolls is 1 in 279,936. That's pretty unlikely. But what's the probability of rolling *that* combination of numbers at the same time you're thinking of calling your friend?

This brings us to the next part: significance. What's the probability the event will *mean* something to you? "These occurrences are not only very hard to explain away, but they also carry with them a strong emotional weight," Sharon says.

She described the case of a woman who, feeling lonely and dejected, was staring out her window at a magnolia tree. She wished for a sign from God, something to let her know God was with her. As soon as she did, one of the tree's flower buds, tightly closed just moments before, unfurled before her eyes. Not only was this woman improbably there and watching at the precise moment the flower opened, but the event satisfied a deep spiritual need for her as well.

Whether calming or unpleasant, these experiences lead us to a place of faith and healing. "They help us learn something about ourselves and our relationship to God," says Dr. Rawlette. "Our spirit is expanded by the way these experiences influence us." For her, these events also bring comfort by showing us the intricate connection between all things. Sharon says, "Look at how the outside world reflects the inside! We're all connected. We're never as isolated as we feel."

Can you remember a moment when something extraordinary happened? I do. I see them all the time. One time, while a family member was giving a eulogy at a cemetery, a hummingbird appeared, hovered over the urn for a minute and then left. Everyone gasped. Hummingbirds were this person's favorite. What was amazing was the flowers weren't blooming. There was no reason for the bird to appear, other than as a sign.

I'm sure you've had similar experiences. When it happens, you can't explain it. It just is. I believe this is glimpse of the way God's Spirit goes before us, is active in us, and works with us. God's grace is like a safety net, making good things happen all the time. We may not be sure why they happen, but we can appreciate it when they do. I believe God sends us divine reminders: we aren't alone. God is with us.

Our scripture from Matthew 2 reveals a core truth of our faith.

Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. But the narrative comes to us through an improbable event which we might struggle to understand. If seeing a flower bloom, or a hummingbird appear, or a phone giving directions to an overseas friend is odd, imagine what it must be like to experience the presence of an angel, like Zechariah or Mary.

Now, imagine raising the bar a whole other level or two, encountering the living Christ. This is what the arrival of the magi in Nazareth was like. It's not just arriving to find a baby at the time and in the place you expect. That's odd in itself. To know the child is a king adds significance. Encountering the living God, incarnate as a child, would blow your mind!

Luke tells us the magi fell to their knees. This is an act of worship. The gifts were secondary. Finding the child, knowing who he was, and then realizing God was present changed their lives. And they knew it. They also knew their presence would bring unwanted attention, so this is why they didn't return to Herod and Jerusalem. They went home another way.

As improbable as it was, it took the attention of strangers – foreigners, to wake everyone up. After all, things were pretty quiet before this. Mary had the baby in a shed in a small town, surrounded by animals. And the angels appeared to low caste, migrant workers in a distant field, far from the suburbs of Jerusalem or any major city. It's the combination of all these things which makes it improbable.

Faith and science aren't in conflict. There are times when the curtain of the ordinary parts for a moment to show us the extraordinary. And the visit of the magi is one of those special moments. So special, we remember it every year, because of what, and WHO, was revealed.

Epiphany comes from two Greek words which translate as “the light shows forth” or “the light comes to.” Dictionary.com says epiphany is “a sudden, intuitive perception of, or insight into, the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience.” Whether real or symbolic, an epiphany is a moment of realization or insight.

Epiphany is the “Ah, ha” moment when we get it. We figure it out. We see the light. Jesus is the King of Kings. He isn’t just a Jewish Messiah, sent to save select people. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, who came to save us all.

This is good news, a message everyone can embrace, yet some don’t. Rather than celebrating, some are troubled. When those who should be alert and paying attention don’t, it’s heartbreaking.

In Jesus’ day, it was Herod and the Temple leaders. Their response to the visit from the wealthy, mysterious and well-connected strangers is startling and disturbing. Herod sees conspiracies. People are out to get him. Anything which diminishes him or is contrary to his desires is unwanted. And when the leader is disturbed, the people are troubled, as this means difficulties will follow for them.

Today, some hear the story but can’t get past their difficulties with the church as an institution. Church hurt is a real thing for some. Apathy rules for others. And, sadly, there are those whose appetite is only for their own interests, conspiracies or games for wealth, influence and power. They miss the moment and dismiss it as coincidence.

“We’ve seen the star.” That’s what those early astronomers said. Have you ever tried to point out a particular star to someone? It might go like this: Right there, see the tree? The little one? No, the big one over there. Over where? Right there, beside the house, next to the streetlight. It’s right above the tree. What tree? Never mind

It’s hard to get people to see what we see and hear what we hear. But we keep trying. We want to share what we’ve seen and experienced. The Psalmist shares a verbal image of what love and compassion are like after a time of unrest and chaos. And we know this is what Epiphany means, this light shining in the lives of all people.

But look closer. Look at the response to this light, not just from the people who recognize it, know what it represents, and have been looking for it. It's the nations who are gathering. Those with no knowledge or understanding of our doctrine, church or the stories of the Bible gather because they are drawn to the light of the world, just like the magi.

What an amazing thing this is! It isn't the result of an amazing evangelism project, but what it means to simply be the people of God, walking in the light, together. This sends a message.

That's the key, isn't it? Walking together. A handicap to the church's mission in making disciples is its inability to have a single voice on anything. Not only do we have a variety of voices – which isn't a bad thing – we also fight with our siblings when they disagree with us.

What might bring us together? We are created with a need to worship, or pay homage, as the magi said and did. That's what brought them so far, however far it was. That's why they went to Herod and anyone who might help them find their way. They longed to worship, as do we all.

This is one of the things we can forget to pay attention to, our need to worship. It's not just a need, but a longing, a deep longing nothing else will fill. We are incomplete without it. We are missing something of significance without it. Epiphany is an opportunity to fill the void, to make us whole. We get to experience a moment when God draws back the curtain of the ordinary to give us a glimpse of the extraordinary. And we want more.

Venite Adoremus, come and worship. This is the invitation of the magi. Its prophecy fulfilled. This is the meaning of Epiphany. It's a gift from God. Come and worship. Come and meet your heart's desire. Come and be made whole. Come together and be remembered.

Let us pray ...

Psalm 72:11-14 (CEB)

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.

He has compassion on the weak and the needy;
he saves the lives of those who are in need.

He redeems their lives from oppression and violence;
their blood is precious in his eyes.

Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.”

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

*You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel.”*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you’ve found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.” When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.