

Discerning What the Signs Are Saying
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
January 7, 2024, Epiphany Sunday
Isaiah 60:1-7; Matthew 2:1-12

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Epiphany Sunday. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We give thanks that we share both the bounty of this place and the beliefs that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and that our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

On Christmas Eve we paused in the beauty of the candle-lit sanctuary to see the light shining in everyone's eyes. It was a symbol for what happens every week. We look for the light in one another, we savor it, and we join all our light together into a force of love that creates a comforting sanctuary of community around us even when we are apart. The power of that light shines through us into the world to do the work of the Spirit.

It all begins the way it did on Christmas Eve, passing from one person to another the light of our loving care and support. Please extend yourself today especially to those you do not know well and those you know are struggling in some form of darkness. May everyone here feel held in the light of love, both in person and on Zoom...

Call to Worship Epiphany is a season of light. The word epiphany comes from ancient Greek meaning to reveal. Epiphany Sunday celebrates the wise men or Magi following a star to Jesus and then following a dream back home. During the Season of Epiphany we look for the light of the Spirit revealed in Jesus and our own lives and the world.

We need our epiphanies the way the Magi needed theirs. We need glimpses of the Spirit to strengthen our faith and hope, and to keep guiding us to the light through the dark and dust of our desert journeys. We need epiphany especially at moments that are turning points when changes or challenges lie ahead. We need epiphany right now in this troubled nation and on this

endangered planet in this fateful year. We need to discern what the Spirit would have us be and do in this new time.

We can prepare ourselves to receive the epiphanies we need by self-emptying, so let us open wide our hearts and minds to all the manifestations of God's light we may find here today in the word and music and silence, and in this loving community.

Children's Time: Good morning! At our Christmas pageant we sing "We Three Kings," but in the Bible they are not kings, they are called Wise Men or Magi—Zoroastrian priests who studied the stars for signs.

Zoroastrians believed in a God who made the universe, whose wisdom is deep inside all creatures and things, a God who is trying constantly to move us to be wise and make the earth the most peaceful, fair, loving, beautiful, good place it can possibly be.

These Magi saw a star and through their reading and wisdom and intuition, they believed it a sign of the birth of a great leader who would grow up to help renew and perfect the world, so they set out to find this child.

They let their belief and hope change their lives and move them from the comfort of their home across a vast desert, not knowing for sure where it would lead, but having faith that it was important that they use their time and gifts and life in this way.

People have remembered this for 2000 years because those wise men who followed the star as a sign were themselves a sign to everyone else. Their long, dangerous journey gives a sign to the world that says that those who are wise will follow at any cost what Jesus says and does.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a wise prophet who followed Jesus because of a long line of wise people who followed Jesus before him, all tracing back to those first wise men who followed the star.

If we are as brave and wise and we act boldly based on our beliefs about the signs we see, then someday our children's children's children may be in this church because of the stars we followed and the courageous things we did for the sake of love. We are part of the same story, the same movement as Jesus and the Magi, and the Spirit is trying to do the same kinds of things through us.

There's something that can always help us understand the signs the Spirit sends us and find the strength we need to follow them... Let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

Discerning What the Signs Are Saying

The Magi read signs in nature, in prophecies and in dreams. They trusted their discernment of those signs enough to guide their actions. They lived both on the surface of the world and in a deeper, spiritual dimension that informed them about the surface life, and that made them intuitively wise, even though by surface standards they may have looked foolish.

Their actions were partly spiritual, but equally political. They worshipped the human child, Jesus, as being full of the Spirit. They also proclaimed him ordained to be a revolutionary leader of the Jews. They followed a message from an angel in a dream to take another way home—a spiritual event—in order to protect Jesus from King Herod—a political event.

The word epiphany means something that is revealed, a sign whose meaning we discern. We have epiphanies frequently in our daily lives, we read the meanings of signs in nature or in relationships. Most of us turned to science to forecast this storm, but some felt the signs in their joints. I suspect many of us have already looked at someone this morning trying to read the signs of how they feel. Many of us look for signs when we have a decision to make—should we go on that trip, or should we take on that job.

We can think of this attempt to discern the meaning of messages and signs as surface data gathering, like holding up a finger to feel the direction of the wind. Or we can approach discernment in a way more like the Magi, seeking intuitions and insights that come to us as messengers from the living, flowing Spirit, whether we call them angels or gut feelings.

Many spiritual traditions, including ours, offer teachings and practices to help us sense the sacred way or Tao that is always present, but that takes a wide-openness, a patient waiting and watching to perceive, like the Magi on their tower. It takes prayer and deep listening to discern where it is leading—listening to our hearts and spiritual writings and wise friends. Jesus insisted that this was the way to go through life.

We have just entered a year that will be fateful to our nation and all nations and the earth as a whole. Every person alive faces multiple emergencies on a massive scale, what Gus Speth and others call the polycrisis, visible in wars and environmental degradation and social inequality and threats to democracy and many other forms.

Those of us who have the good fortune to be of relatively sound body and mind face a choice that we cannot avoid making of how to respond, because not to respond is itself a fateful response. Next week we will look at our individual responses, but today we need to ask ourselves how we read the signs and how we could respond collectively.

The excerpts quoted in the Order of Worship today are from Henry Nouwen's extremely useful and beautiful book, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. This is what they say:

Certain events...serve as signposts.... Thomas Merton identified the 'signs of the times' as *kairos*—a quality of time that is eternal, when time is full of meaning and events point to divine purpose....

When millions of people experience the same event or series of critical events in the world, these events become, according to Merton, occasions to discern the signs of the times. And the messages they contain are not only for the individual but also for the community of faith and the world at large....

Kairos means that the opportunity is right. It is the right time, the real moment, the critical event, the chance of our lives. When our time becomes kairos, it opens up endless new possibilities and offers us a constant opportunity for a change of heart. The events of life—even such dark events as war, famine and flood, violence and murder—are not irreversible fatalities but rather carry within themselves the possibility of becoming a moment of change.

It is easy to see by observing surface signs in *chronos*, or chronological time, that the world is heading toward danger in many ways that feel like what Nouwen calls "irreversible fatalities." It takes seeing signs in *kairos* to discern how the surface direction is not the only one, how forces of violence and greed and fearful self-interest are not the only powers at play. If we live attuned to *kairos*, we can see that there are even greater powers with opposite purposes that are on the move even now.

Living in both *chronos* and *kairos* is like those times when you can see lower clouds and upper clouds apparently moving in different directions and at different speeds.

Chronos is what the news media cover, *kairos* is what visionaries and prophets and system thinkers and process theologians cover.

The news in *kairos* time is that human evolution is still happening, that even now a transformation of consciousness is taking place, increasing numbers of people are taking up

contemplative practices like meditation and mindfulness, a greater percentage of humanity is reaching a universalizing or integral stage of development where they can see the oneness of all people and life and have unconditional, Christ-like love.

Kairos shows us the Spirit at work in advances in restorative justice, healthy communication, nonviolence, new forms of inclusive, equitable community and both new and ancient ways of living in harmony with the earth.

A kairos moment is like catching the flow of those higher clouds and letting their power propel us onto a whole new path in chronos. This can happen if we let it change our heart, if we let ourselves follow it as the Magi followed the star.

So how are you reading the times at the start of this fateful year? How do you read the surface, chronos time signs? And how do you read the spiritual or cosmic kairos time signs beyond the surface? When you put these two together, what do they say we should be doing collectively as a congregation or town or nation or world?

We will have a chance to reflect on those questions together in a few minutes, but first, let us sit with them in wordless silence and invite the Spirit to move in our hearts...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Chickadees flew to the railing to feed.
No sound from their wings.
Silence.