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Epiphany Sunday C
Peace, Seattle
January 6, 2019
Matthew 2:1-12

ULTIMA THULE, ULTIMUS REX

News of the successful flyby trickled into NASA on New Year's Eve:
After traveling 4 billion miles to the outer reaches of our solar system, the New Horizons spacecraft had come within reach of the most distant object ever visited by humankind: a small space body with the nickname, "ULTIMA THULE" – a place beyond the known world.[1]

Stereo images transmitted from New Horizon's cameras in recent days are revealing a truly mysterious site: a three-dimensional object 21 miles long, composed of two rough spheres—one larger and one smaller—stuck together in the middle.

A world, in other words, that resembles a lumpy snowman—and a red one to boot!
Who knew that Frosty had a distant cousin working the outer rim of the Kuiper Belt?

NASA scientists are positively giddy. Based on what they've seen thus far, their working hypothesis is that these two spheres came together in a slow-motion impact early in our solar system's history.[2]

But stay tuned! We're in the realm of mystery here, folks! And as we learned from the Pluto flyby 3 years ago, assumptions even the best minds make about distant worlds can be wildly off the mark!

When it comes to our gospel story for this Feast of Epiphany, we're in the realm of mystery as well. That mystery was rooted in ages long past when prophets spoke of a special child who would unite heaven and earth; a prophecy that came to birth in a Bethlehem stable.

Shepherds—those unwashed, illiterates of the hinterland—were the first to catch word of his birth, Luke said. But there were others, Matthew tells us, who were on a search for the newborn king.

The word "Epiphany" means "shining, appearing, manifesting," and we associate it with that shining STAR whose appearance in Eastern skies compelled certain Wisemen on a pilgrimage that led them to the young Jesus.

Of the gospel writers, it's only Matthew who tells the tale of these ancient Astrologers, THE MAGI. And whether the astronomical sign they witnessed was a star, a comet, a supernova, or an unusual conjunction of planets—all options that have been proposed—the magnitude of what they saw in the night sky sent them on a seeker's journey to find not the ULTIMA THULE but the ULTIMUS REX—the king beyond all others.

In the weeks ahead, as the season after Epiphany unfolds, we'll see how the light of that star becomes internalized in the one who is the Light of the World.

- We'll see the Light shine on Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan, and again when he calls new disciples on a pilgrim's journey.
- We'll see it flash from a pulpit in Capernaum, and hear it reflected in his parables and teaching;
- We'll watch that Light reach beyond traditional boundaries of race, class, and gender as Jesus touches, heals, forgives, and transforms.

[1] *The Seattle Times*, January 3, 2019. https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/scientists-show-off-space-snowman-ultima-thule-in-3d/
[2] Deborah Netburn, *The Los Angeles Times*, January 3, 2019 https://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-ultima-thule-science-20190103-story.html

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- And finally, we'll see the Light surround and illumine Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration.

As we move through this season, we'll learn that Jesus is more than a prophet or miracle worker or holy man. He is God in the flesh; God on Earth.

Today we begin that journey of discovery as we fall in with the Magi's caravan, navigating at night by the lights of the heavens, keeping our eyes trained on one special star.

Interesting, isn't it, that at the dawn of the year, when we revel in predicting what the future will hold, we hear this story of ancient stargazers who received a transmission of something new and profound; a transmission that propelled them on an expedition to the source.

Of course, not everyone in this story is guided by pure motives. HEROD, when he hears that Magi are seeking a new king, has quite a different reaction.

Herod was the kind of guy who was up before the sun each morning, eager to switch on his device and consult his daily HOROSCOPE. For Herod was deeply concerned about the future—and more precisely HIS future. Actually, OBSESSED is more like it.

Herod had serious CONTROL ISSUES. When it came to the question of maintaining his power, Herod did everything possible to insulate himself from change—which included murdering his own offspring in order to prevent them from becoming a threat to his reign.

So it's not hard to imagine Herod having a panic attack when he hears news of a royal birth.

When foreign travelers from who knows where, show up in Jerusalem after traveling who knows how long, and start asking questions about a new king of the Jews, Herod's blood pressure shoots up a couple dozen points and immediately he begins to plot a solution.

Now, truth be told, Herod, in this regard, is not that different from you and me. None of us likes to feel that our life is out of control; that events that will affect us directly are beyond our reach.

Most of us are most comfortable when we can lay out a rough map of our personal universe; when our lives assume familiar rhythms; when we can anticipate when something new is about to go down. We tend to feel more secure, more prepared, more ready and able to cope with whatever lies ahead.

But when the order of the universe and of our lives is called into question, when issues of health, of safety, of economic security—or the myriad other things we can't control—show up on the radar screen, our anxiety rises and we start feeling the stress that comes with not being in control.
When the Magi show up in his city, Herod isn't sure what to do. So he arranges a secret meeting with them in order to manipulate the circumstances toward his ends.

GO, FIND THE NEWBORN KING – he tells them—WITH MY BLESSING!
AND AFTERWARD, LET ME KNOW, SO I, TOO, CAN PAY HIM HOMAGE.

But what Herod soon discovers is that no plot on his part will work this time. His scheme has been thwarted by none other than the Master of the Universe himself.

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For something in the world shifted when the Starchild was born. Something nearly undetectable yet fundamental took place when Mary gave birth to her firstborn.

The Magi understood this enough that it compelled them to journey beyond their known world.

Herod tried to put a stop to it, but his tactics proved worthless—after finding the Starchild, the Magi return home by another way.

As we anticipate all that the New Year will bring—both individually and as a congregation, this story of the Starchild invites us to see that it's not you or me who's in the driver's seat, but rather God.

And that when we put our trust in God's will rather than our own, we open ourselves to seeing and experiencing how God is at work in, with, and under the unfolding narratives of our lives; and the unfolding saga of the universe.

As the New Year begins this story invites to look carefully for signs of God's reign among us. And Matthew adds: BE PREPARED TO BE SURPRISED!

There are greater forces at work in our world and in our lives than we can possibly imagine.
And when we look at the world, at our neighbor, at one another with the light that faith brings,
we will discover beneath outer signs how God is at work within us bringing light to the darkness.

The guiding light of a Star beyond the known world summons us on a journey this New Year.
Centered in God, it shines in the face of the Christchild Jesus, the ultimate king. Amen.