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Spirituality



A star named TYC 3203-450-1 outshines a more distant galaxy, NGC 7250, in this Hubble Space Telescope image. (ESA/Hubble & NASA)



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January 3, 2026

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"Rise in splendor, your light has come!"

"When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled."

Isaiah and Matthew spoke about the same reality and opposing reactions from people who heard of it. Ignatius of Loyola would explain that when good people hear the Gospel, the "good spirit" gives them peace and consolation; the "evil spirit" causes the same news to bring dreadful consternation to those whose purposes run counter to God's designs.

First, let's look at the evil side. According to Matthew's narrative, the news of a newborn king so disturbed King Herod that he ordered a massacre of all boy children born around the time of the Magi's travels. This story is probably less factual than symbolic: It creates a parallel between Jesus and Moses who was saved from Pharoah's slaughter of the Hebrews (Exodus 1:15-22). Yet even if Herod didn't order the massacre, he was cruel enough to order the death of his own sons, whom he saw as rivals.

The Epiphany of the Lord

January 4, 2026

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Typical of Jesus' enemies, Herod couldn't tolerate the danger Jesus posed to the evil powers that propped him up. To Herod, as to the pharaoh, the good news posed a lethal threat.

Now to the good spirits. Isaiah proclaims that the very glory of God will shine on and through the people. The darkness they experienced stood in stark contrast to what God was working among them. Isaiah teaches that knowing God's glory causes people's hearts to throb and overflow such that their very faces reflect divine glory. According to Isaiah, knowing God's glory makes people so attractive that the whole

world will be drawn to them.

In Matthew's narrative, the Magi symbolize all people who seek the glory of God and who, when they see signs of it, are willing to journey beyond their own horizons, seeking God's yet-unknown grace and wonders.

Paul, in his own way, reflects the Magi's spirit through his life-changing discovery of the mystery of Christ's love. In contrast to the murdering Herod, when Paul encountered Christ, he became the apostle who proclaimed the good news to Gentiles, insisting that Christ came for all Earth's people.

This year, we will hear the Gospel of Matthew. The story of the Magi introduces two of his key themes. First, Matthew highlights Christ as our Emmanuel, God with us. The angel who appeared to reassure Joseph called Mary's unborn child Emmanuel, indicating who Jesus would be (Matthew 1:23). In the last words of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples with the promise, "Behold, I am with you [Emmanuel] until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

The second theme the Magi introduce is Emmanuel's presence for the whole world. Just as Isaiah proclaimed that nations would walk by the light of Israel, Matthew speaks of foreigners who sought the one heralded by their star. They trekked long and far to the insignificant town of Bethlehem to find that light.

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This theme, too, finds its counterpart at the end of the Gospel when Jesus commissions the disciples to "Go and make disciples of all nations." In the presence of Emmanuel, there are no foreigners.

Matthew's Gospel invites us all to contemplate the reality of Emmanuel, God with us here and now. We are setting off into a year of paying particular attention to recognizing Emmanuel in our midst.

The feast of the Epiphany reminds us that the good news is for everyone of every age. Its proclamation can bring great joy or cause terrible consternation, depending on what each person or society values.

The feast of the Epiphany invites us to enter deeply into these readings. With Isaiah, we can meditate on what truly makes our hearts throb and grow. Reading Paul's words to the Romans, we can recall ways in which we have felt God's invitation into mystery and newness. We can discern about the signs of our times and ask what things we have heard that were "not made known to people in other generations." Then we ask ourselves what we are capable of as people made "coheirs, members of the same body and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus."

If we are adventurous enough, we might ask the Magi what would draw them forth today. What is happening that would echo in their hearts? Who would they invite to journey with them seeking God's newness? The Magi would then ask us, "What do you long for so much that you would search heaven and Earth to find it?"

Epiphany urges us to decide what will orient us in this coming year and to set off toward it with the bold and adventurous hope that can only spring from faith — a wonderful way to begin a year of concentration on the Gospel of Matthew.

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec. 19, 2025-Jan. 15, 2026** print issue.