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Today the church celebrates the final day of the twelve days of Christmas (which is actually tomorrow). Today we celebrate *Epiphany*, which means “to make known.” Epiphany used to be called *Theophany*, which means “vision of God.” So what is this final day of the Christmas celebration all about? What is God’s grand finale? The final Christmas act is a making known of the vision of God...

...so what is this vision of God?

After all, God has already painted a beautiful Christmas picture. God has already assembled all the components for a perfect nativity scene...Mary, Joseph and Jesus are there. The shepherds and their sheep are there. The heavenly host of angels are there. Everybody is present and accounted for—human beings and animals and the supernatural. All the puzzle pieces seem to be in place. Nobody seems to be missing.

And yet, God must have felt that somebody was missing at the manger, or else there would be no such thing as Epiphany or Theophany.

God sees an empty spot at the manger and knows exactly who needs to fill that spot, and that is the stranger. There are no strangers at the manger. Even though Mary and Joseph are far from home, they are still surrounded by relatives in Bethlehem who have also come to register in their ancestral town. The shepherds are local herdsmen. While you could argue that the angels are strangers from far away, they have already appeared several times in the Christmas story—first to Zechariah, then to Mary, then three times to Joseph, then to the shepherds. So, while they may have flown in from far away, they are still friends in this story, not strangers.

God determines his Christmas story is incomplete, unfinished.

God finally concludes the Christmas picture will only be perfect when there are strangers at the manger. And so this comes to pass. But it takes time for God’s vision to be completed. The wise men come from far away, and the journey takes them years to find the child. When they finally find the house where Jesus is living, the shepherds and the angels have long since left. But that doesn’t matter—sometimes in life it takes a long time for pieces to come together.

Their visit is brief and single in purpose. They come to give gifts. And so they do. They lay down before the child their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh—gifts befitting a king, not a child. Maybe kids today would be thrilled to find gold under the Christmas tree, but I don’t know many who would rejoice at gifts of frankincense and myrrh, especially knowing these precious resins were used in burial rites.

Nonetheless, their presence has been long-awaited. They are the period at the end of the Christmas story. Finally, with strangers at the manger, God’s vision is complete. God’s vision of his kingdom is now all-inclusive—human beings and animals...salt-of-the-earth shepherds and hosts-of-heaven angels...the uneducated, simple minded shepherd and the wise, majestic foreigners...all gathered together around the same king.

The only thing these puzzle pieces have in common is the one around whom they gather. They share nothing else—place of origin, standard of living, education, even religion. They are as diverse as they could possibly be. And the miracle of Epiphany is that God does place provisions on any of these people before they come to the

manger...God does not say to the shepherds, "Go, bathe, get haircuts and clean up your language and then you can come to the manger." God does not say to the sheep and donkey, "Go, exchange your plain selves for more exotic, impressive animals like elephants and ostriches, and let them come to the manger in your place." God does not say to the host of angels, "Go rehearse your songs until I give you my approval before you sing at the manger." God does not say to the wise men, "Go, convert from worshipping your Persian, Syrian or Indian gods, and worship me alone before you come to the manger."

We don't know anything about these wise men. We don't know if there were three or twelve or thirty. We don't know if they were kings or scholars or scientists. We don't know specifically where they journeyed from. We don't know their names. We only know they brought the three gifts. Christian tradition has filled in these gaps, to give them names—Casper and Melchior and Balthazar, mystic kings of Persian, Syria and India...but this is all legend, dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. We're not supposed to know a lot about them. They're not intended to become our best friends. Their role is to be the strangers from far away, invited to the manger of Jesus the Christ.

That's the miracle of Epiphany—that God has just blasted apart a vision of his kingdom from an exclusive club of insiders to an inclusive assortment of outsiders, broadcasting to the world God's magnificent vision of divine hospitality, whose only command to the earthy shepherds, lowly animals, heavenly angels and foreign mystics is a single word, "Come."