

“From Generation to Generation: We Keep Seeking”
Matthew 2:1-12

In thinking about Epiphany and the clarity that comes from the light of Christ, I thought of one of the top words of 2022: “Gaslighting.” This term refers to “the act or practice of grossly misleading someone especially for one’s own advantage.” I found this to be interesting in the age of Fake News and the many ways we get misled in life. People are seeking to be more aware of the times when they are being gaslighted. One of the hardest things in life is to see things with clarity. It is much easier said than done because none of us can see reality objectively. Even the word reality is misleading because we often think that what we know is the “reality” of the situation or of life.

Theologians and teachers of the faith often wrestle with this. In 2019, theologian and writer Brian McLaren came up with a list of 13 biases that we tend to have as human beings. He wrote, “People can’t see what they can’t see. Their biases get in the way, surrounding them like a high wall, trapping them in ignorance, deception, and illusion. No amount of reasoning and argument will get through to them, unless we first learn how to break down the walls of bias.” Here is his list:

1. **Confirmation Bias:** We judge new ideas based on the ease with which they fit in with and confirm the only standard we have: old ideas, old information, and trusted authorities. As a result, our framing story, belief system, or paradigm excludes whatever doesn’t fit.
2. **Complexity Bias:** Our brains prefer a simple falsehood to a complex truth.
3. **Community Bias:** It’s almost impossible to see what our community doesn’t, can’t, or won’t see.
4. **Complementarity Bias:** If you are hostile to my ideas, I’ll be hostile to yours. If you are curious and respectful toward my ideas, I’ll respond in kind.
5. **Competency Bias:** We don’t know how much (or little) we know because we don’t know how much (or little) others know. In other words, incompetent people assume that most other people are about as incompetent as they are. As a result, they underestimate their [own] incompetence, and consider themselves at least of average competence.
6. **Consciousness Bias:** Some things simply can’t be seen from where I am right now. But if I keep growing, maturing, and developing, someday I will be able to see what is now inaccessible to me.
7. **Comfort or Complacency Bias:** I prefer not to have my comfort disturbed.
8. **Conservative/Liberal Bias:** I lean toward nurturing fairness and kindness, or towards strictly enforcing purity, loyalty, liberty, and authority, as an expression of my political identity.
9. **Confidence Bias:** I am attached to confidence, even if it is false. I often prefer the bold lie to the hesitant truth.
10. **Catastrophe or Normalcy Bias:** I remember dramatic catastrophes but don’t notice gradual decline (or improvement).

- 11. Contact Bias:** When I don't have intense and sustained personal contact with "the other," my prejudices and false assumptions go unchallenged.
- 12. Cash Bias:** It's hard for me to see something when my way of making a living requires me not to see it.
- 13. Conspiracy Bias:** Under stress or shame, our brains are attracted to stories that relieve us, exonerate us, or portray us as innocent victims of malicious conspirators."

Into this scene comes the light of Christ to help us go deeper into reality than what our logical minds can see and do. This was the experience of the magi, the wise men from the east. Their knowledge and faith led them to seek beyond what was comfortable and known. They didn't know all the facts or had a hold on the truth. In fact, their consciousness bias was at work where they assumed that the star would lead them to a palace, a place of power for the birth of a king. Just like us, they let their social norms blind them to see that the one they were seeking was born to ordinary people. But what saved the day for them was the fact that they were willing to continue seeking, never settling for easy answers but digging deep into their visions and into divine mystery. Let's listen to their story from Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.' ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is a very dramatic story with lots of twists and turns, but it is also a very familiar story in our world. There is the conniving king who would do anything to keep his power, even if it meant lying, cheating, or killing. We know people and leaders like that. Sometimes we are the conniving ones. Then there is the wise men who try listen to God, but misinterpret the signs because of their assumptions about power and kings. We can so identify with this. Then there is the innocent family who had no idea what was coming their way because of human cruelty. But the true power of this story is that it reverses our expectations. These so-called foreigners and outsiders to the faith and ethnic group of ancient Israel were the ones who followed the guidance of God and thus saw reality more clearly through the eyes of faith. Their key quality was openness to divine mystery which led them to never stop seeking.

No matter how educated, experienced, or wise we might feel or actually be, we can never see reality objectively. We are often gaslighted, not just by others but also by our own fears, needs, and past experiences. Our invitation and challenge are to continue to open our hearts on a regular basis through contemplative prayer. The truth of God is much bigger than us and we are always vulnerable to mistakes and biases, but when we listen to God with our hearts, we are able to continue to seek and expand on Christ's way of love.

One of the ways we do this at Epiphany is by using the tradition of star words. "It is a prayer practice in churches all over the world to give people a star word on this Epiphany Sunday. There are many reasons behind this tradition. First, we know that the Magi followed a star, which ultimately led them to Jesus. Therefore, we too use all the resources we have available to us—including creative prayer practices and intention words for the new year—to move closer to Jesus. Secondly, we trust that God uses multiple ways to guide us and speak to us. Star words are one such lens that might provide us with a way to look for God in our midst, both actively and in hindsight.

Finally, we know that the most common prayer practice for many involves speaking to God as opposed to silence or contemplation. However, this prayer practice invites a new prayer rhythm of reflection and review that can be a powerful way to connect with God. As you walked in, you received a star word which I hope that you can use as a guiding word for 2023. We invite you to remember your star word often, seeking the ways God might be moving through the meanings and definitions the word contains. As we prepare our hearts and minds for this centering moment, let us pray. . .

God of today, tomorrow, and yesterday, like the Magi, we are seeking you. Like the Magi, we are bringing ourselves closer to you, step by step, and word by word. So today we ask that you would make yourself known to us. We don't have gold or frankincense or myrrh. We haven't spent the last several days traveling here by camel. We're no Magi, but we're yours. Instead, we bring ourselves to this worship service in hopes of catching a glimpse of you. And we bring with us the concerns of our church and community. As you hold the concerns of our community, we look for the ways you guide us forward. We pray that you would speak to us through these star words, just as you have spoken to your people before. Let these words be an invitation and challenge for this year; let them be light in

the sky that guides us home. Holy God, you were the God of yesterday, and we know you'll be the God of tomorrow, for you have loved us from generation to generation. We ask you today to bless the table that you have set before us. May the bread and the cup we are about to receive become to us your very light and love to nourish us for the living of each day as your beloved people. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.