



Into the  
Unknown

A Spiritual Journey for the Epiphany  
and the Season After

# Into the Unknown

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and The Season After

John van de Laar

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# Introduction

What we believe about God shapes our lives and our world. Everything from how we relate to one another, to how we treat those who are different from us to the foreign policy of superpowers with regard to the Holy Land are affected by how we think about and speak about God. This means that faith and religion are, literally, life and death issues in our world.

As the world faced the global coronavirus pandemic, we witnessed how religious beliefs can get intertwined with political, medical, and financial realities. People of faith were at the forefront of passing along misinformation and conspiracy theories about everything from the source of the virus to the creation of vaccines. And people of faith were too often in the news for creating super-spreader events out of their worship gatherings. Story after story reported believers meeting in defiance of lockdown regulations, often without masks or proper distancing, and the resulting spread of infections among worshippers and their families.

What we believe about God has real world consequences.

And that's why we need to explore what we mean when we think and speak about God. For too long people of faith have been held captive by a vision of God as a man in the sky. This image of God dispensing blessings to the faithful and curses to faithless, and intervening (sometimes) in response to prayer, has not changed in centuries. The sciences have shown us that the three-tier view of the world with heaven above, hell below, and earth in between, is simply not true. Our understanding of creation, the universe, physics, and quantum physics has grown in leaps and bounds. Yet understandings of God have changed very little for most people.

It's time to move beyond our limited, safe, knowable, certainty about God. We need a bigger God than our ancestors, and we need a God that is truly worthy of the name. And a God like this cannot fit into human brains or categories. For God to truly be God, God must be Unknown.

The Season from the Epiphany to the Transfiguration is traditionally focussed on who Christ is. Coming immediately after Christmas, it invites us to get to know the man whose birth we have just celebrated. And it invites us to see how the glory of God is revealed in Jesus. In this sense it is also a call to examine our beliefs about God and allow them to grow and change.

With this in mind, *INTO THE UNKNOWN* leads us on a journey to encounter God through seven different metaphors. Like different lenses, each chapter helps us to let go of our existing ideas of God, and invites us to encounter God in a new and deeper way. At the heart of this journey is the conviction that God has to be beyond our ability to know God. This means that *INTO THE UNKNOWN* is a challenging journey, but also one that promises to lead us into a richer and more meaningful experience of God.

It may feel more comfortable to live with a small, understandable view of God. But a small God is not actually God. And so I invite you to take the risk, let go, and dive *INTO THE*

*UNKNOWN* in this season. And as we do this, we discover that the Unknown God can also be known. We can find both familiarity and *Mystery* if we are willing to open ourselves to it. And this vision of God will lead us into humility and awe as we get lost in the wonder of the Divine Unknown.

## **FOR PERSONAL DEVOTION**

There is no separate devotional resource in this series. This is because I believe that the most effective devotional practice is to return to the words that we have already heard and received in our communal worship, and reflect more deeply on them. And then we can engage with what we are learning practically by repeating the response practices from our Sunday worship, and by being intentional about integrating our learning into our lives in practical ways through the integration practices that are offered at the close of each week's worship. This is the approach that is embraced in this resource.

In order to facilitate this devotional approach in your congregation, I recommend that you give people some way to remember the message they have heard in the preaching—either by encouraging them to take their own notes, or by handing out pre-printed summary notes. It can also be helpful to ensure that the response and integration practices are available for easy reference so that people can use them during the week. This can either be included in the handouts, or people can be invited to write the practices down before they leave the worship.

Social media can also be used to engage people more deeply with these practices in their own time, and video or audio recordings of the sermon can be included as well. Permission to do all of this is included in your purchase of this resource.

## **FOR SMALL GROUPS**

I have also chosen not to do separate small group notes, because in my experience, the best format for a small group is to engage more deeply with what has happened in the larger worship gathering. I believe that congregational worship forms the fountainhead of spiritual practice and personal and small group worship should flow from it.

I recommend that small groups begin with a kind of 'accountability' moment, in which members share how they are each following the response and integration practices for the week in their own personal devotional times. They can share any struggles or questions, and also encourage each other in their practice.

The group can then 'replay' the worship from Sunday, in the sense that they can use the same prayers, hymns and readings, but in a more participatory, conversational way. In reflecting on the Scriptures, each one can bring what they heard in the sermon, and what they have been learning as they have reflected through the week so far. This can then lead to a conversation in which members can encourage each other and learn together. They can either work with the questions that form the response reflection each week, or they can work with the following 'generic' questions:

1. What stood out for you in this week's reading, and in the message that was preached? Why do you think this particularly caught your attention?
2. What does this 'word' mean to you for your spiritual walk in the next week, month, and year?
3. How are you working to integrate this 'word' into your daily living?

Finally, members of the group can pray and encourage each other, and close with any prayers and hymns from Sunday that they haven't yet shared. In this way, the communal, small group, and devotional worship all works together to lead people into a deeper discipleship.

It is my hope and prayer that *INTO THE UNKNOWN* will be a meaningful and transforming liturgical guide, but also an authentic guide for spiritual practice and living.

May God bless you as you journey through the season from the Epiphany to the Transfiguration with *INTO THE UNKNOWN*.

John

# The Feast of the Epiphany

Look to  
the Stars!



# Gathering

## CALL TO WORSHIP REFLECTION:

*This reflection repeats each week. This is because repetition often drives truth home for us much more deeply. But also because, in this series, each week is an invitation to open to a new understanding and experience of God, and so it is appropriate that people spend time releasing their familiar ideas of God at the start of each week.*

*Everyone is invited to become still. You may want to ask them to deepen and slow their breathing, close their eyes, and perhaps place their hands palms up in their laps. Invite them to open to God and become aware of God's presence and Spirit.*

*After a short time of silence, invite everyone to become aware of how they are thinking of God in the moment. What images, words, or metaphors do they hold in mind as they open to God? Then invite them to let go of their ideas, pictures, and assumptions about God and open to a new experience in the worship. Give a few moments for people to be intentional about letting go and open to the new.*

## PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND PRAISE:

God we long to know who we are  
and where we fit into this vast and magnificent universe;  
We long to know that our lives matter and have meaning.  
But we have not taken the time to look to the stars;  
We have not recognised the Cosmic Consciousness  
that fills our universe and flows through all things;  
And we have not realised that our own  
thinking, feeling, seeing, and questioning mind  
is just one manifestation of the Divine Consciousness.  
Forgive us our blindness and for making you so small;

We praise and celebrate you, Divine Consciousness.  
for your infinite complexity,  
your vast intelligence,  
and your presence in every spark of consciousness  
in our cosmos.

May we always remember to look to the stars,  
and to be overwhelmed by their witness to your greatness,  
even as we are pointed back to our earth,  
to see you revealed in the ordinary world around us.

Amen.



# Listening

## READING:

Matthew 2:1-12

## SERMON STARTER:

Richard Rose was a veteran soldier who had served the US military for nine years. He had done two tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. And he was proud to call Donald Trump his President. In a Facebook post on April 28 2020, he stated that he was not going to fall for what he called 'the hype' around the pandemic. And he was not going to wear a mask. The result of his strategy became clear when on July 1, Rose posted that he was feeling sick and then confirmed that he had tested positive for COVID-19. Just three days later, on July 4 2020, Richard Rose was dead.

We may shake our heads at the Richard Roses of the world. We may assure ourselves that we would never be as closed-minded or stubborn. Yet we all have a tendency to cling to narratives that make sense to us, even when our experience should show us that they are false. As Brian McLaren says, "Our brains are wired to believe a simple lie over a complex truth."

You may not be consciously aware of this, although you have probably felt it to be true: you are incapable of living in a perpetual state of confusion. Your well-being, like that of every other person, requires you to make sense of your world. And this is why we cling to simple stories that help us to feel safe, secure, comfortable, and happy—even when they lie to us.

Deep within our souls is a longing to understand our universe. But this is really a quest to understand ourselves. We have an insatiable need to find our place in the world, to know what our lives mean, and to feel that we matter. We cannot endure feeling that life is random. And in our search for meaning we earthlings have always turned to the stars.

## WISDOM IN THE STARS

Almost every king in the ancient world employed astrologers. These early wise men, as they were known, would study the stars to glean wisdom and try to discern divine purposes and plans. And, as priests, they possibly even hoped one day to catch a glimpse of the face of God.

When a group of Persian magi appeared unexpectedly at Herod the Great's palace in Jerusalem, the king and all his advisers were disturbed. The visitors claimed to have seen what they had been searching for. Their lifetime of looking skyward had revealed an astrological marvel that they believed to be evidence of God at work. But the stars had surprised them. Instead of drawing their gaze deeper into the cosmos, the heavens had pointed them back to earth. And so they had arrived at the palace in response to this heavenly call.

The magi were right, of course. There is wisdom to be found in the stars. Over the centuries our methods have become more rigorous. But every learned student of science from

Copernicus to Galileo to Newton to Einstein has turned to the heavens for knowledge. The insights gleaned from this stargazing have deepened our understanding of the universe and helped us to shape the natural world to our liking—for better and worse. And in every case, the stars have pointed us back to earth. Everything we learn by looking up teaches us about what we see when we look down and when we look within.

Every spiritual seeker must, at some point in their journey, turn their eyes skyward in search of a glimpse of God. And every one who catches a hint of the divine in the heavens, will find their gaze being drawn back down to earth. Science has shown us that we are made of stardust. We share atomic particles with planets, suns, nebulae, and asteroids. When we look at the universe we see ourselves reflected there. And when we look within us, we see the cosmos smiling back. If we are to make sense of our lives, we will have to consult the stars. And the stars, in their wisdom, will show us who we are and where we fit into the great cosmic story.

### **CHILDREN OF THE STARS**

What the magi hadn't realised when they knocked on Herod's door was that they had made a very dangerous mistake. After their sighting in the heavens had pointed them to earth, they no longer seemed to feel the need to look up. Their assumptions and expectations took over and they followed what they had learned from human systems and social hierarchies. They were searching for deity and they assumed that the divine would never settle for anything less than a palace. They expected that the arrival of a god would be grand, visible, celebrated by all, and radiant with glory. But they had misunderstood the nature of God.

Their first clue that they had gone astray was Herod's confusion. How could a great king not know about the birth of a god in his palace or his country? Why did he not know where this wonderful appearance was taking place? Why had he not seen the sign in the stars and learned what they knew? But then they realised a simple truth. The stars were not directing them to a palace.

Once again they looked up. This time they followed the heavenly sign more carefully. But they must have been shocked when they discovered that their search was taking them to an ordinary house in a small, unimportant village, where a very ordinary child was living. The glimpse of God that they now saw must have shattered their preconceptions and categories. God was no longer confined to the heavens. The face of God was smiling at them from the face of this boy, his teenage mother, and his bewildered father. They had discovered that divinity is present not only in kings and angels, but in ordinary people like this humble family. Like themselves.

We live in a conscious universe. We now know that animals, trees, and even electrons can communicate. What we previously believed to be inanimate and unaware we are now beginning to recognise as alive and filled with consciousness. It was Annie Dillard whose writings first invited me to think of the consciousness of the universe as another way of understanding God. Each person, each creature, each element in the cosmos is far too small and finite to contain the Cosmic Consciousness. But, each one is a node, a manifestation of this Divine Intelligence. And when the entire universe, in all its mysterious connectivity is considered, the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts. The stars, when they point our gaze back to earth, back to ourselves, are simply trying to show us this miraculous truth.



## LOOK TO THE STARS

We have the freedom to choose a simple lie over a complex truth but we will never find the meaning we seek there. We can ignore the vastness of the cosmos and concern ourselves only with our tiny corner of the world. But we will never understand who we are or what our lives mean if that is our choice. If we are to find our place in this world, in this universe, we will need more than a small story of individuality. We will need to dive headlong into the unknown. We will need to start consulting with the stars. And we will need to lose ourselves in the greater meaning of the universe that is becoming increasingly awesome, beautiful, complex, and creative.

So go out into the night and look up to the stars. Allow the magnificence and vastness of the universe to overwhelm you. Recognise the Divine Consciousness looking back at you and feel your connectedness to the consciousness of the universe.

If the God we believe in can be contained in a simple story then we are not dealing with God at all. And such a God will never bring us the sense of meaning, belonging, and value that we long for. It can be disorienting and frightening to release our simple stories. But the benefits far outweigh the sacrifices.

Isn't it time you lifted your eyes and looked to the stars?

## Responding

### PRAYER OF INTERCESSION:

Great God, Consciousness of the Universe

We ask you to show us where we fit into this vast cosmos;  
show us what our lives mean,  
and show us that we matter.

*Silent prayer as each person offers their own prayers for the earth*

Cosmic Consciousness,

We ask you to make us aware of your Divine Intelligence,  
in ourselves and in all things,  
so that we may honour our universe  
and protect the earth which is our home.

*Silent prayer as each person offers their own prayers for the earth*

Great God, Consciousness of the Universe

Help us to see you in the people around us,  
even when we disagree  
so that we may find peace, connection, and compassion  
for all who share this planet and this time in history.

*Silent prayer as each person offers their own prayers for others*

## Cosmic Consciousness

Help us to prefer complex truths over simple lies,  
to welcome the wonder of gazing at the stars,  
to find joy in seeing what a small part  
of the cosmic whole we are,  
and to learn to dive, regularly and deeply,  
into the Unknown.

Amen.

**EUCCHARIST** (if it is to be shared – see [Table Liturgy](#) below)

### RESPONSE MEDITATION:

*Invite everyone into a time of reflection. The following questions may be helpful to guide their thoughts:*

- Where do you cling to small and simple stories that aren't true and that could be hurting you?
- What would it mean to think of God as the Cosmic Consciousness? And to think of yourself as a small node that is just one tiny part of that vast Divine Intelligence?

## Integrating

### LIVE THE WORD:

*As a way to help your people to carry their experience of worship into the rest of their lives, you may want to invite them to spend time looking up at the stars each night this week. If they aren't able to get outside, they could perhaps use an app that reveals and explains the night sky where they are. Or they could watch television shows or TED talks that reveal the magnificence of the universe.*

### BENEDICTION AND SENDING:

*Invite everyone to greet each other with whatever closing greeting is appropriate in your community.*

*Close the service with the following sending statement:*

*Go to open your mind and your life to the Cosmic Consciousness.*

