

Home by another way

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I really enjoy holidays. In fact, when I was growing up, my mom (and her mother before her) made it their practice to celebrate in some way nearly every holiday. We'd have cherry pie for George Washington's birthday, distribute May-baskets on the first day of May, and so many more. Our favorite Christmas movie when I was a kid was, and still is, Holiday Inn, where the protagonist would only open his Inn for holidays.

Jay and I carried on the tradition with our own kids, celebrating, normally with some kind of special food, each holiday. We certainly exchange valentines, chocolate naturally, and have corned beef for Saint Patrick's Day. But we also started celebrating Chinese New Year, coming up on 2/16 for those of you keeping track. We watch the movie Ground Hog Day everyday February 2nd. Saint Nicholas would find the kids' shoes for coins, especially the chocolate kind were quite the hit.

When it comes to liturgical practices, until very recently we put up our tree towards the end of Advent. We really try hard not to succumb to retailers' encouragement for us to start our own Christmas season around the time of Halloween. So in our house, we are still enjoying the Christmas holiday all the way through this weekend, Epiphany. With all the emphasis on Christmas earlier each year, it seems like we as a society are beyond ready to put this whole season behind us now. Epiphany is this weekend, and let's celebrate it!

What is Epiphany? Liturgically it is the 12 day after Christmas, or January 6th. It is the day we celebrate the light of Christ coming into the world. It is the story of light and how the light and gift of Christ this season changes everything.

Epiphany is not the end of the Christmas season, but rather the culmination; it is what we have been waiting for. You see, Matthew takes a very different approach to the whole Christmas story. In fact, Matthew really doesn't have much of a traditional Christmas story in it at all. Just before today's passage we have the story of Joseph being told in a dream not to be afraid to take Mary for his wife. Immediately following that is our gospel passage for today, which must have occurred sometime after Joseph's dream. In it is no mention of a stable or manger or the lack of room at an inn in this story.

Instead, Matthew introduces us to the story of the magi.

Who were these magi? Almost certainly they were not Jewish, and came from a long way away. Matthew lets us know that Jesus' birth is of cosmic significance in that a star appeared at his birth and even people a long way away were drawn by its light across many, many miles to find this child. This was not some ordinary heir to the throne, but rather one that had already changed the world. The magi signify that this Christ child is for all people. All people, not just the Jews, despite being known as the king of the Jews. This, child whom Joseph was told to name Jesus, savior, comes for all, not just the nation of Israel. He comes for us as well.

Like so many stories in the bible, I sometimes feel like I have already heard this one before. I know how it comes out. Because of that feeling, I sometimes seek out other translations of the bible to see if another take at it with slightly different language helps me to hear afresh what God is saying this day in scripture.

So I want to try something out. I'd like to try to tell an Epiphany story, while not exactly factual will hopefully ring true this first Sunday of the New Year.

Once upon a time...

Don't all stories start that way?

Once upon a time, there was a man who loved to look at the stars at night. He charted them, and noticed over the course of many years when something was different. He loved his nighttime charting, always looking for inspiration to carry him into the next day. He just was not satisfied with life and kept trying new things looking for fulfillment. The last few years it was tracking stars. Then it finally paid off. Lo and behold a bright new star appeared, not one that gradually gleamed brighter or moved slowly over course of many days, no this bright star was suddenly there. And it was there the next night and the next. He loved to look at this star. It didn't seem that far away, almost like he could touch it, so he decided after several weeks to see if he could get any closer to this thing, as it seemed to be calling him. He packed some gold, just in case he needed to bribe whoever was at the end of that star.

Off in another country, not too far from the first, another man found himself looking for fulfillment in books. He loved his books and read and read until he could almost find nothing more to read. He was always looking for the answer, wherever he could find it. One night, he noticed his candle light seemed even brighter, so he could read easily. And while going out to tend his camels, he noticed there was an enormous star that seemed to have popped into the sky, not too far away. The next night that star was there again. After a few weeks, he realized that he was able to read every evening by the new starlight. Soon the books weren't nearly as interesting as this star. He wanted to find out more about it. His reading led him to conclude it was a sign from above that a new king had been born. Only a king of a nation with a deity at its center could be the answer. He decided to see if he could go and see this new king. After all, if a star appears when the child is born, he must be really important. He decided to bring a gift of frankincense, that beautiful smelling gift that grew nearby but was so expensive only kings ever possessed it.

This story repeated itself in other nations with other scholars keeping track of signs and wonders. A number of them decided to see if they could find what this star portended. Traveling by night, so they could follow this star, the men, some might call them smart or wise, found each other as they made their quest to find this thing that is so important the heavens burst forth in light. All had brought gifts, some had gold, others frankincense and one even brought some myrrh. Over time, they decided it must be a child, born king of the Jews. As they drew near, they realized the child would naturally be in Jerusalem, the seat of power for Israel. Their little caravan approached the king's home, and they were escorted in to see King Herod.

Perhaps they were a bit on the naïve side, but these wise men decided to tell the truth and ask their question directly of the king, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

Herod was none too pleased. He was an awful man, let alone ruler. He hadn't had any children recently, so this pilgrimage to find a newborn king unnerved him. In fact, he was beginning to lose his mind and kept threatening everyone around him if they but looked cross-eyed at him. People around him were beginning to bicker, but out of earshot of that nasty king, since who knew what he'd do at any moment.

Because the king was troubled, everyone around him was troubled also. The palace was not a good place to be. The king's press-secretary tried to calm everyone down saying that there was nothing to see here, but those darn camels the foreigners had ridden in on were drawing attention to themselves. Everyone was nervous about just how long these visitors from the East might stay since they were clearly not there to see Herod.

Herod wanted to get to the bottom of their quest and gathered all the intellectual elites into one place and made them come up with an answer about where a king of the Jews might be born, since he clearly was not any sort of religious scholar, despite himself having been bestowed with the title of King of the Jews by none other than Caesar Augustus. The chief priests and religious scholars scratched their heads and decided that if not in Jerusalem, then this prophet called Micah had a long time ago mentioned something about a little town called Bethlehem.

“You, Bethlehem, land of Judah
By no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel.” (Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2)

The king really wanted those wise guys gone so he could unleash an evil plot, he'd been considering. The king went to the magi secretly and asked just when that star appeared, so he could find out how old his *political rival*, rather than that baby was, to rid himself of any challengers to the throne. With a gritted teeth the king said, “Tell ya what, you guys head on over down the road about 9 miles or so to Bethlehem, and when you've found him come back and quietly let me know where I can find him. I want to kill that little guy,” he said with clenched fists. “I mean ‘may go and honor him.’”

Oblivious to the king's intent, the magi left the palace and noticed that the star was out in front of them, actually moving and leading them to the town of Bethlehem. They were so excited to the point of feeling absolutely joyous to follow once again to exactly where that star led! When they had reached Bethlehem, they noticed that the star had stopped right over a tiny house. The magi were puzzled, this was not anywhere close to what they had thought they would find after following the star for so long. They had imagined the King of the Jews living as a wealthy man, but this was a poor person's home. Yet, they certainly knew a sign when they saw one; that star was literally right above this tiny, but well-cared for home. They dismounted from their camels, got out the gifts they planned to give him and knocked on the door.

Mary, who had just been feeding her growing baby boy, answered the door and was surprised to find such wealthy looking unusual visitors outside her door. They seemed nice enough when asked if they could come in. And then they did the most amazing thing: they dropped to their knees to honor her son. It was so surprising, and yet somehow it wasn't surprising at all. These foreigners, whom she had never met, came to see Jesus. They came to honor her baby. Mary was thinking about how they must have come from such a long way away; their clothes were so different from that of the folks who lived around here. These very wealthy men, had bowed their heads and seemed to be praying. It wasn't any Hebrew prayer she had ever heard, so she pondered this quietly. Once they were done praying, they presented her with gifts for the baby.

But now, the wise men realized, those gifts seemed all wrong. What would a poor child need with gold or frankincense or myrrh? That amount of gold would probably take care of him for a lifetime if it

weren't stolen by thieves, but what would he ever need with frankincense or myrrh? Where would he keep it in this tiny house? This child needed blankets and food and a few toys. But Mary, she saw nothing wrong with the gifts and thanked the gentlemen profusely. These men had seemed so taken with the child, she thought they might want to hold him for a moment or two. The magi gladly accepted the chance to spend more time with the one whom they had sought.

The magi realized this was nothing what they expected and yet felt so very right. Herod may have had the title, but they sensed that this baby Jesus was the one who would shepherd his people when the time came, as they had heard from the prophet Micah. They independently realized they came all this way, although the journey did not result in what they expected, came out so much better than they could have imagined. Their lives were now complete. They had been changed. They wanted to stay, and soak in this moment.

Mary noticed how much they enjoyed holding and playing with Jesus, so she invited them to share the simple supper she and Joseph were going to have, of some wheat cakes and a little wine with them. She asked them to spend the night, remembering to show her guests true hospitality. Gathering around the table was perhaps the most perfect part of the evening; everything seemed right in the world.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus all slept well, but their guests were troubled by dreams. The men got up before breakfast and planned to leave quietly, but first they each thanked the boy's parents for the gifts they had been given.

Mary laughed and asked what in the world they were talking about. The first wise man thanked for the love felt among this family. He realized he no longer needed to look for God in the stars at night. One of the men realized that this was quite an amazing story and he thought he might just need to go around sharing the story of this child. Another of the magi realized he had found meaning, not in books, but here, gathered around the simple table.

Once outside Bethlehem, they just did not feel right about going back to that horrid Herod. They realized they had all had dreams to avoid going back to Jerusalem. And when they looked up, they noticed the star wasn't there any longer. It had done its job. The light of the world was now burning in their hearts, having met that child. Now everything was different. They were changed.

So they went home by another road.