

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Finding Joy

I wish I could write about five Epiphany sermons. Epiphany is about so many things. And there are so many parts to the story! How can one worship service, and one reflection do it all justice?

The word Epiphany with a capital E refers to Jesus becoming known to the Gentiles, which is to say to the ones who were not, like Jesus himself, raised to be Jewish – which is to say the magi were the beginning of something *namely this understanding that Jesus came for us all*. In lower case, the term refers to any revealing or manifestation, (big word there) any revealing of God to people, though these days the word is often used to refer to any insightful or dramatic moment that brings forth a new spiritual insight, vision, or perspective.

People in this sense use "epiphany" all year long. "I had an epiphany" someone will say "about what it is in life I am really called to do" or people will speak of "an epiphany about my marriage, on what makes my spouse tick"

But let's stick with the story first. Let's say a few things about the magi and who they were.

They were not kings, but travelers from faraway Persia, folks who would have seemed exceedingly exotic in the backwaters of Bethlehem, home of Jesus birth.

In a way, they are unlikely folks -- like Shepherds -- unlikely folks to have discovered the Christ child. Their mystical craft, studying stars and discerning fates in the night skies, a craft gleaned from the ancient Sumarians predated even Moses -- so that is way, way back. As one commentator says, the magi did not spend their time focused on a Messiah, and yet they are the ones who have come to worship Jesus. (James Howell, in *Feasting on the Word*, Epiphany Sunday)

And then there's Herod, also part of the story. The magi didn't really need a dream to tell them not to return to Herod. His expression of interest in Jesus -- "that I too may worship him" -- was a bunch of hooey and you didn't have to be an official wise person to get that. Herod may have had all the trappings -- the fancy palace, the rich robes and gaudy crown, but in truth he was a troubled megalomaniac and he was troubled because the upside-down King that Jesus is might just turn Herod's world and his power upside down too and Herod definitely wasn't up for that.

In their own way the magi were early resisters. They did not do as Herod commanded them. They foiled King Herod's plot to kill Jesus by simply going home not by way of Herod's palace but by another way.

A poet named TS Eliot lifts up how the magi were changed by their journey: "*.... they returned home, returned to their places, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods...*" TS Eliot seemed to understand that Jesus didn't come to make our lives more comfortable. Jesus didn't come to help us fit in and succeed. Jesus came so that our eyes might be keen: that we might recognize false gods all over the place, and that we too might find joy in unlikely places too.

Which leads me to the joy story I want to share today. It is simple, but it needs a little background. Background which some of you know, but I believe many of you do not.

It's about my dad, and in telling it you need to know that my Dad was for most of his life a very brilliant man, a nuclear physicist. Growing up, he was simply the smartest person I knew. My father was a scientist who did research developing various sterilization techniques using radiation beam technology. He traveled to many countries to attend conferences and give papers, and he invented a few machines as well, many with applications in the food packaging industry. He was also athletic and graceful. Once a runner and pole vaulter, he climbed ladders, cut down trees and walked dogs well into his eighties.

Now my Dad is different. At first it seemed like it was just aging -- he was getting tired more easily, more forgetful too. After my mother died he came to live with us, but after a year he got a diagnosis of dementia, specifically Alzheimers Disease, and after some more time (including a fall and a hip break) he moved to an assisted living place, because it was too hard and probably dangerous for him to live with us anymore. Some of the kids and teenagers who came caroling to Brookdale a few

weeks back met my Dad, or saw me sitting with him as you cheered us with your singing.

Anyway, along with forgetting things my Dad seems to have gotten stuck in this mind about one thing: a wedding. My brother was married at 56 for the first time this past year, and there were other weddings in our extended family, but those have come and gone, and still my father is asking about a wedding, sometimes in the middle of the night he's looking to get ready for a wedding, and regularly, when I visit, he'll ask me how the wedding went.

So it was New Years Eve past and the folks at Brookdale were gathered in the common room for some entertainment, some wine and cheese. Dad was there, and apparently enjoying it all, as I was told. When the singer stopped his singing, Dad got up from his chair, the wingback chair by the fireplace and began walking on his own. Grace, who is one of his main caregivers, came to his assistance (you need to understand my father isn't really walking anymore, he is pretty much confined to a wheelchair) "I have a toast to make" my father said, as he wobbled his way up to the front.

And there he stood, wine glass in hand, my father in front of the gathering of residents and workers where he proceeded to deliver a fine, eloquent best man toast to "the wedding couple" who were, at that moment, unnamed, and nowhere in sight. Everyone listened, and when it was over, when my father nodded his head and said "thank you for listening" I am told the entire crowd gave their applause.

This episode was shared with me by Lynne, another of my dad's caregivers and I have been giggling about this ever since. My father is Canadian, and Canadians love toasts. More than that, when my Dad first went to assisted living, I thought it was about the worst thing ever. But again and again I find life, and hope in that place. And it feels like kind of a victory story, because while there are so many things my father cannot do anymore, he can offer a toast -- and isn't it a great kindness, an act of love to offer a toast? And what better setting in which to imagine yourself but at a celebration of love, a *wedding* and what better way, when you think about it, to ring in the new year?

The story makes me giggle, but it is like Joy finding me. Which is something I am learning about joy. It is seldom that which we construct. It is often that which finds us and takes us by surprise.

The poet Annie Dillard says "We live in all we seek. The hidden shows up in too-plain sight. It lives captive on the face of the obvious – the people, events, and things of the day ... What a hideout: holiness lies spread and borne over the surface of time and stuff like color."

So where have you had your eyes opened in a small "e" epiphany type way? Where have you found yourself of late surprised by Joy?

(the Shaunnessy's will share, and maybe some others.....)