

January 2, 2022

Looking for God in all the Wrong Places

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to thee O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

Happy New Year! Today is the second day of January, in 2022, and the second Sunday after Christmas when we are celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany as we follow the three Wise Men to Bethlehem.

Of course there had to be a star! God in her divine wisdom knew the Wise Men would never stop and ask for directions.

Our Christmas stories have been cemented into a familiarity that leaves out fascinating and provocative elements which emerge when you stop and take a look at our assumptions. We have over the past 2,000 years, hammered out a certain reality about the Epiphany that drains it of its mystery.

Let's start with the Wise Men. "We three kings have traveled afar..." We sang it this morning. Many of us have been singing it for decades.

Except in all probability they weren't kings. In our text this morning, Matthew never claims they were, nor does he say there were only three. By all accounts, they were Magi, who Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber describes this way:

They were magi, as in magicians, and not the cute kind you hire for your kid's birthday party. More likely, they were opportunistic, pagan, soothsaying, tarot card-reading astrologers. Yet history makes them out to be kings, maybe because the reality that they were magicians is too distasteful, since no one really wants the weird fortune-teller lady from the circus with her scarves and crystal balls to be the first to discover the birth of our Lord.

What's the difference you might ask? The difference is that God has been breaking rules right from the start. Divine power always stands in opposition to empire and oppression and that opposition began with the birth of a tiny baby in a dirty stable.

"God is using an astonishing number of tools and strategies to draw all kinds of unlikely people to the baby in the manger," writes Episcopal priest Kristin Saylor, who continues saying:

We may not know exactly who the magi were, but we can be fairly certain they weren't Jews. There's a significant boundary crossed right there, Gentiles, foreigners, worshipper of another God seeking audience with a Jewish king to worship a Jewish Messiah.

Dreams are banished to the cheap seats, too, in the familiar telling of the events leading up to, and through, the Epiphany. Joseph was ready to leave Mary, Matthew tells us in the verses preceding today's text, to protect her from public disgrace, but is warned not to in a dream that affirmed Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and will "save his people from their sins." The Wise Men, too, are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. And, once again Joseph is told in another dream to flee to Egypt because Herod is out to kill his child. Joseph and Mary flee in the middle of the night to Egypt with their newborn baby. Refugees on the run, in fear.

We often skip over what happens next; a blood-thirsty Herod orders the murder of all children under two in and around Bethlehem.

It's a wild and gruesome world, yet God still came, bringing heaven and earth together in the birth of his son, Jesus; the shining light that comes into the world as heaven and nature sing.

When seen against the darkness that loomed on the outskirts of the Christmas story, the light of Epiphany blazes even brighter. We celebrate Epiphany today, four days ahead of schedule. The actual feast day is January 6th.

I don't need to remind you of the evil on that day when the Capitol was stormed by violent insurrectionists attempting to overturn the results of a free and fair Presidential election. Five died in the murderous assault and 60 judges have ruled there was no evidence of voter fraud.

The anniversary of that dark day occurs simultaneously this week with the celebration of Christ's light pouring into the world.

The choice is ours. Do we live in the light of Christ as God's beloved? Or sink into fear's darkness, pinched tight in pessimism?

Yes, it's possible to have faith and fear. But we choose how much energy to give them. We choose how we live, how generously we love, and where we put our trust.

Epiphany reminds us we are baptized into the light of Christ. We live with the promise of the resurrection, not the hope, but the *promise* of the resurrection. Fear and death are never the end.

Over and over scripture tells us “Be not afraid, I am with you.”

The pandemic, our rector, Emily’s, departure, make our worlds regularly quake with fear.

How are we going to live? What will St. Peter’s become?

Write’s Debie Thomas in “Journey with Jesus.”

To embrace Epiphany is to embrace the core truth that we are deeply, deeply, *deeply* loved. Can we bear to embrace such mind-bending truth without flinching away in self-consciousness, cynicism, or shame?

May we all embrace Epiphany’s light and let it into the dark corners of our lives and shine forth into our beleaguered world. Epiphany can be a time of magic and awe, especially when we open our hearts to look for God in unexpected places.

Episcopal priest Kristin Saylor reminds us that God will always defy being put in a box.

The story of Epiphany is a beautiful testament to the ways in which God transcends all human categories and constantly disrupts our expectations of where, how, and to whom God will appear. God is an opportunist, who will use any tools at her disposal to draw us back to her love, from tiny humans in mismatched pageant costumes to stargazing Persian magicians. So what unexpected means is God using to speak grace to you?

This Epiphany, may the God who spoke through strangers, stars, and dreams, open our eyes to the wildness of God’s love.

God’s love, and Christ’s light will always burn brighter than our fears, if we let them.
The choice is ours.

AMEN