

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Feast of the Epiphany – January 6, 2019
Matthew 2:1-12

There are some encounters – some moments, experiences, revolutions in thought – after which the world suddenly is seen in a new light. Throughout the 90’s and early 2000’s, it seemed that everyone was speaking of the “paradigm shift”. While I, for one, got very, very tired of this expression, it was an apt turn of phrase. It describes the experience one has when one’s framework of understanding the world around us is fundamentally altered... when the lens through which one views and comprehends reality changes. When one experiences a paradigm shift, everything is suddenly seen by a new light, and one then journeys by another road.

One of the earliest and most powerful experiences I had of a paradigm shift occurred when I was in college. I grew up unchurched in a strongly liberal, secular humanist, and over-educated college town that was greatly formational in how I understood the world around me. I was brought up understanding that nearly everything was relative, and that little was absolute outside of the goodness of being good. Needless to say, it was a surprise to everyone when I started taking religion courses in college, not to mention when I decided to major in comparative religious studies.

Throughout my exploration of the variety of religious expressions, I held the conviction that all religions and people were essentially the same –that they espoused the same basic values and pursued fundamentally the same goals. And any differences noted were the result of the differing contexts in which they arose and were formed. I sought and found comfort in finding the similarities across religious philosophies, thinking of them as natural parallels that were the essential truths in which the religions were grounded, which then pointed to the inherent commonality of all people.

But one day in class, my tidy and comforting worldview changed. I no longer remember the topic of discussion but I remember the very physical sensation I felt when this paradigm turned inside out. Instead of seeing all religions as essentially the same because they reflected the essential sameness of people, I saw a new world in which people and religions are very diverse and often essentially different, but that their shared points of similarity came from people within diverse contexts who happened to reach the same philosophical and theological conclusions.

I know this sounds like argument of semantics, but for me at that time it was momentous. I imagine it was not unlike hearing for the first time that the Earth revolved around the sun rather than the other way around, and suddenly everything shifted position. Since that time, I have had other encounters with truth –sometimes through people met and loved, sometimes through sorrows endured, sometimes through new beginnings experienced. And in each of those encounters, my essential understanding of life and meaning shifted and I was forever changed. And I then journeyed by a different road.

In Matthew’s Gospel, our most Jewish of gospels, we have this wonderful story of the Gentile wise men from the east seeking the newborn king of the Jews. What is surprising, of course, is that it is not priests or other Jewish religious leaders who come to attest to this

truth, rather that it is non-Jewish foreigners who come to pay homage. Those that should have been aware of the advent of the one for whom they have been waiting, and the one to whom the scriptures point, are unaware that the Messiah has been born.

These wise men are usually referred to as the magi, the use of this term refers not so much to their being magicians as to astrologers who studied the heavens for signs of significant events. These were learned men who not only saw the appearance of the rising star, but also recognized the importance of it and who journeyed over great distances trusting that following the direction to which the star had pointed would bring them to the one they sought.

The journey of the magi was most certainly a journey of faith. Scholars posit that that it probably took weeks, if not many months, to travel from Persia or Babylonia, where they most likely called home. To travel such great distances based upon interpretations of a rising star, is remarkable indeed. Most of our collective imaginings of the magi are of three men on camels following an exceptionally bright and certain star, but I suspect that it wasn't all that clear and obvious.

There must have been many long periods of time in which the star was a dim and uncertain signpost. For it seems that, as with Abraham with Sarah, God calls us to leave the relative safety of home and journey into the unknown, and often the destination is unclear. Rarely does God call us to something easy and unambiguous – to a sure thing. Rather God most frequently calls us to journey in faith into places unknown, seeking and following heavenly signposts wherever they may appear.

Now that these wise men have arrived in Jerusalem, Matthew makes a point to contrast the magi, who sincerely wish to pay homage to the “king of the Jews”, and Herod, who claims to be the “king of the Jews” yet who seeks to destroy rather than worship the true king. Despite Herod's long reign and power, he is frightened with the news of the magi, the intriguing royal child, and the sign of the star. These events threaten to expose that Herod has been granted kingship not by God but by Rome, while Jesus has true Jewish royal blood. And while the Gentile magi seek the infant king to give gifts and to worship, Herod seeks to destroy the threat he believes is revealed in this child.

These are two opposing and yet very real responses to the revelation of God in Christ. The magi notice and recognize the sign of God's work in the world, and by seeking and encountering this revelation are forever changed and they return home by a different road. Herod, along with the religious leaders, also recognize the signs but because of fear – fear of loss and change, perhaps – they seek to destroy and snuff out the threatening light.

But I believe there is also another common response to God's revelations – one that occurs far more frequently. That is, to refuse to even see the sign; to ignore it and pretend it's not there. Or to be simply too distracted to even notice

All around us are revelations of God's presence and work in the world. All around are the rising stars, both bright as well as faint. All around, we can hear the baby's cries, summoning us to pay homage. In order to experience the epiphany, we need to open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts in order to recognize them. We should be like the magi, searching the skies for the signs – waiting for their appearing. We must be willing to see and recognize when the angels approach and the stars stop above our destination, when the bushes burn and the clouds part. When God speaks to us through unlikely people and shows himself in surprising ways.

But these signs can be missed or ignored, and often are. By you, me, all of us. To notice is to risk the comfort of the familiar and known. Because, if we recognize the signs for what they are – if we hear the summons and see the truth revealed before us – we have no choice but to respond. And then we must decide the path of new life or the path of destruction. Either way, we are forever changed.

So, Matthew's story asks each of us several very important questions: what do we do when we encounter the light of revelation that is the Word made flesh, however faint that revelation may be? What is our response to God's revealing of himself in the world? Do we dare risk and allow ourselves to see the star and recognize its significance? And if we do, do we trust, leaving behind what is known and familiar, and follow the star into the uncertain and unknown future? And when we finally do know the destination to which God calls us, do we seek to pay homage or to destroy?

These are the challenges that Matthew presents to us today, and these are worthy questions – the answers matter. This work of God in Christ is a mystery that, once encountered, will forever change you. Seeking and finding the gift given us in Christ will turn our fundamental understanding of life inside-out and nothing will look the same again. And embarking from this encounter, you are certain to journey by another road.

Let us pray.

All gracious and loving God, in the blessings that abound in this New Year, may we dare to seek and encounter in our lives your Word made flesh; may we have the courage to notice and follow even your faintest of lights; and may we be forever changed, being transformed into the likeness of Christ. All this we pray in the name of your Son, our savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.