

The Feast of the Epiphany
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Untraveled Roads to Christ

“Star of wonder, star of night, guide us to thy perfect light.” Amen.

It is a new year and many take this as an opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning. Maybe you’ve made some resolutions to get to the gym more, to work less, to find more time to spend with family, or to help more in your community. Resolves that start out strong often get put aside as we get back to the realities of work, school and other responsibilities. Our own broken promises may take us down a path of guilt and resignation.

We might wonder if the angst that leads us to make resolutions in the first place could be a call on our hearts, a spiritual longing of some sort. If our souls are yearning for more purpose, adding one more thing to the “to do list” only brings more restlessness. Perhaps determination is not what is needed, but rather, the faith to follow untraveled roads. The spiritual quest to the Christ child will lead us through wilderness places, where we must trust in what we cannot see and look for light to appear in unexpected ways.

Today we hear the story of the wise men who made this faithful journey. This beloved gospel story is read for the Feast of the Epiphany that occurs on the twelfth day after Christmas. In this season we witness an unfolding revelation of who Christ was and is to the world. The word Epiphany means a “divine illumination or revelation” and celebrates the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, through the visit of the magi. Drawn to Bethlehem by the light of a star, that simple encounter revealed God’s intention to welcome all into the kingdom. No one would be outside of Christ’s saving embrace, but all would have to walk the path to meet Christ.

The story begins after the birth of Jesus, in the time of King Herod. Matthew’s account of the journey to the manger is told with dark overtones. It was an age when a powerful system of domination ruled the ancient world. Rome governed through client kings who were crowned in the name of God and were said to rule by divine right. Herod was particularly ruthless and violent, reigning through domination and terror.

When the spiritual seekers called “magi” came from the east, to pay homage to the child born “king of the Jews,” they stopped in Jerusalem. These exotic and scholarly travelers, most likely of a priestly caste from Persia, were widely respected. Herod’s response to their presence however, was fear and rage. So threatened by the notion of a rival king, Herod had already killed over three hundred men on suspicion of conspiracy, including two of his sons. He summoned the wise men and tasked them with finding the child. His thinly veiled plot turned murderous when he ordered the slaughter of innocent children to protect his throne.

While Matthew’s portrayal is not the stuff of pageants or children’s stories, it is a realistic account of the world into which the savior was born. The divine had come into a dark time and the star was a sign of hope to God’s people. Emmanuel, God with us, broke through a world shadowed by fear and violence to be a living, vulnerable, promise of new life to all who seek him. As the magi followed the star to Bethlehem, they recognized an encounter with the divine.

Bringing gifts to honor a king, they bowed down in worship and vowed to go home by another way.

When you understand the political context, the nativity narrative takes on new meaning. The story speaks to all generations living amidst suffering, proclaiming that Christ comes to bring hope and redemption. W. H. Auden, an American poet living in another dark time, wrote a satirical but poignant work entitled, *For the Time Being "A Christmas Oratorio."* This poem was published in 1944 in the shadows of the holocaust, and grounds the significance of the incarnation in the conditions of the present world. God's redeeming love is offered to all in this unlikely savior.

Auden's poem maintains that whatever joy Christmas may promise, the journey to the Christ child can be treacherous. His treatment of the magi implies the vulnerability and challenge of being a seeker. In this version, the wise men set out to encounter the eternal and receive a warning from the star that guides them:

Beware. All those who follow me are led
onto that Glassy Mountain where are no
Footholds for logic, to that Bridge of Dread
Where knowledge but increases vertigo ...

We identify with the very human longings of Auden's three kings.

At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,
But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.
To discover how to be human now
Is the reason we follow this star.

Auden knew that in the midst of war, one could fathom that there is no God, that there is no hope. But his poem suggests that the incarnation makes God present in the world here and now, in our own kingdoms of anxiety. The kingdom of God is not a heavenly place to run from the troubles of this world, but must be found in the flesh, perpetuated in love. His nativity story for grownups acknowledges the hatred and violence in our world and the need for God's redemptive love to be our guide. To discover how to be human now is the reason we follow this star.

Fast forward to our own time and we see that rage and violence are still pervasive in the world. Innocents are still oppressed and dominated in the name of power; resources still belong to the few and fear holds its tight grip among those in control. If we have lost our sense of wonder, even the faithful have difficulty imagining a different world. But God enters our generation with hope and a vision that calls us. It is a vision for us and for all of creation that is made flesh by the work of our hands. It takes courage to follow this path to the Christ child and encounter God from the very depths of our humanity. When we meet the divine we can never go home by the same road again.

You may have come today hoping to sing one more Christmas carol and hear this timeless story of the wise men. But if we hold on to that sentimental perspective, it is simply a tale we pack up and put away until next year. The promise of God with us in the here and now bringing newness of life, to redeem our suffering; I want to carry that with me and be guided by that.

Now that the New Year is here, maybe our resolution can be to make that pilgrimage to the Christ child. The journey holds both threat and promise, for there is no map and the terrain can be treacherous. What longings will you bring? Will you be guided by that star of wonder? How will an encounter with the divine change your path? Saint Augustine wrote:

We, beloved, of whom the Magi were the first fruits, we are the inheritance of Christ even to the ends of the earth.... Let us so proclaim him on this earth, in this our mortal life, that we may not return the way we have come, nor retrace the footsteps of our former way of life. This is why, too, the Magi did not return the way by which they had come. A change of way meant a change of life.

Christ has placed a call on each of our hearts, and as we share stories of our encounters, we participate in the ongoing revelation of the Word made flesh. God invites us *all* to the manger whoever we are, however unprepared we feel, however broken or confused our hearts may be. We are challenged to walk the untraveled roads with faith and assurance that there will be a light to guide our way. To discover how to be human now is the reason we follow this star, Amen.