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2ChristmasC: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12

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I think, like many stories in the Bible, our story of the wise men searching for and visiting the baby Jesus has been so ingrained in us that it has lost a lot of its surprising power.

I think it is easy to imagine, this many centuries later, that the wise men just spent their lives wandering around in the desert, holding on to their gifts and waiting for a baby to bring them to. That the Magi were professional Messiah seekers. But this could not be further from the truth.

The three wise men, who have been much distorted by history, were not kings, and there is no reason to believe there were only three of them, only that they brought three gifts. The Magi, as they are also called, were astrologers and scientists, and were engaged in looking at the world in a completely different way from that of religion.

These were rational men of science, given great respect because of their great body of knowledge and probably NOT very inclined towards receiving sudden revelations from God. They were not seeking the Messiah. The fact that the star led them to Bethlehem was the result of their work. There were probably no people in all of the area who were LESS interested in the birth of the king of the Jews.

Except perhaps for Herod, the King. He is another person in this story who can sometimes just seem like a cardboard villain. An obviously very bad guy who eventually has all the children in Jerusalem killed just so that he can assure his fragile ego that his power will not be threatened by a baby.

Herod was a military ruler who apparently got his position through the major use of violence and was loyal to the Roman rule of his time. And as the Romans pretty much let the people they conquered live as they pleased, he would not necessarily have had anything to worry about if the Messiah HAD appeared.

But Herod has an epiphany, no less strong than the Magi following the star. Herod, of all people, seems to get it that this baby who has been born has something to do with God. And is somehow going to threaten his power.

So it is a bit of a surprise, when you think about it, that the Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ, the sudden understanding that the birth of this baby has something to do with the birth of God in this world, comes NOT to believers, but to unbelievers. Comes to the frightened ruler and the rational scientists. The last people in the world who probably figured they would be starring in a story about God's Incarnation two centuries later.

My very first spiritual advisor and role model was a Jesuit priest who had previously been Jewish and a physicist at NASA. He liked to say that he became a Christian by following a star. Staring into the heavens, pondering the universe as a pure scientist, not believing in God at all, he became more and more intrigued by the unbelievable unlikelihood that random events could lead to the formation of a coherent world. As he studied the minute possibility of life forming on other planets, given all the variables necessary, he realized more and more how minute the possibility was that life was formed on THIS planet, and he became more and more convinced that there MUST be a God.

And then one day when he had a powerful conversion experience, virtually at his telescope, looking at the stars, that God was real and manifest in the world, in our daily activities. And it changed the entire course of the rest of his life.

And this is what 'epiphany' is. According to my dictionary, the word has three major definitions – 'a revelatory manifestation of a divine being,' 'a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something,' and, 'a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization.' In other words, God making God's presence known in the world, our recognition of it, and the understanding that this changes everything.

And we use the word 'epiphany' today to mean everything from realizing where we left the car keys to what motivates us to take up new vocations or relationships. But the truth is that real epiphanies start with God. And according to our own story, they show up in the unlikeliest people at the most unlikely times. And provoke the most unlikely responses.

I have another friend who says that she became a Christian by accident. Because it was an accident that took her husband from her, and she was widowed at a very young age. And she was furious. And she didn't know if there was a God or not, and frankly, she didn't care, because if God did exist she hated him for taking away the man she loved. But eventually, she began to understand that something was sustaining her, even in her darkness.

And that it was something that was large enough to sustain even her hatred. And eventually she began to comprehend that whatever this was, it began to feel like love being born again, very slowly, in her heart. And eventually she understood that to accept this love, she would have to give up her hatred. And when she did, she discovered it was God. And this changed everything.

As Christians, I think sometimes we carry around this notion that we should hide our doubts and our unbelief. That the things that don't make sense to us, the places where it all falls apart, the times we think God is nice idea but we just can't get ourselves to feel that God is real are occasions for our shame or somehow a mark that we are not living up to some Christian ideal.

But I think, just like the characters in the Gospel today, that it is JUST these places and times in our lives that God is being born into. That it is exactly the paradox of our faith that the more we believe, the more places of unbelief in our lives are being opened up. And the more we move AWAY from God, the more God is manifest in exactly the places where we turn away. And the more God can suddenly appear in ways that may surprise, and even threaten us.

Epiphanies are not just new ideas but the very presence of God overwhelming us with wonder. And the only places these occur are the places where we have not known God before. I think that the good news of our story of the Magi is that it is EXACTLY the parts of us that are prone to fear, even anger, are the parts of us that are available to wonder, to miracles, and that is where the birth of Jesus Christ is going to get us the most. It is in these places that we may suddenly be filled with joy.

And, honestly, we may suddenly be filled with rage, as well. And that's still good news. Because this is still the result of understanding that God is real. That we are not in charge. That something small and subtle can turn our lives upside down.

The Magi's lives are changed by meeting Jesus. We have no idea if they became believers in the Messiah or if they just went home and continued their lives as wise men. But we do know two things: that they were overwhelmed by joy after following a star to the birthplace of Jesus, and

that they went home by another way. No matter what happened afterwards, they were changed forever.

Herod's life was also changed by Jesus. We would never remember him today if not for his encounter with the baby born in Bethlehem. And we also have no idea what became of him later. How his heart and his life were eventually changed by what threatened his power the most, or even if they were.

And the absolute truth of this story is that God is real. There is 'a revelatory manifestation of a divine being,' God making God's presence known in the world. The rest of the story is where, and how and who understands this. Our recognition of God, and our understanding of how God becoming one of us changes everything.

The Magi, after making their journey, take a different way home to their own countries. But they are not alone. The truth is, we ALL go home a different way after we meet Jesus. After we realize that God is real. Some of us may be overwhelmed with joy. Some may be filled with rage. Some may think it has absolutely nothing to do with us. This is all part of the story. The story of God with us.

One by one. Journey by journey. Epiphany by epiphany. The wise ones and the angry ones, the ones who are scared and the ones filled with joy. The unlikely and the unwilling and the unsure. The manifestation is real.

And it will change us all.