
Home by Another Road

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The Cathedral of St. Philip
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Matthew 2:1-12

This week we observe the Feast of the Epiphany""from the Greek epifaneia""meaning radiance; in this case, the radiance of God's face reflected in the Christ child, and in turn, in the faces of those who gazed upon him. Each year we hear this strange, mysterious story of the journey of the Magi, their visit to Bethlehem, and their encounter with Herod.

What does it mean to have taken a journey and looked at the face of God, as these Magi did? And, perhaps an even more compelling question, what became of them when they returned to their homes? How were their lives different, if indeed they were? And, begging the question, how are our lives different as a result of our encounter with the "radiance" of Christ in this Christmas season just past? To what does our experience of Epiphany bear witness in ordinary time? In the last line of Matthew's Gospel text, we hear that the wise men did not return to their homes the way they came, but rather went home by another road. What might the implications of this be for your journey, and mine? How might we, and our homes, and perhaps the nature of the journey itself be different because of this encounter with the light?

What difference does it make, really, in the midst of what the novelist Walker Percy referred to as the "everydayness" of an ordinary Wednesday afternoon when back home, regardless of how we get there, we have bills to pay, and it's time to get back to school, and to work, and we are taking the dog to the vet, or running the carpool, or getting that overdue mammogram or the visit to the dentist, and we are beginning to think about that April tax filing. Really, are we not in some ways like the wise men, who after their encounter with the radiance of Christ, had to go back home?

Images of light, in all of its qualities and infinite varieties, invite our wonder as well. Epiphany is the feast of the radiant light and the invitation to walk in that light. Why is this metaphor of light so compelling to us? A few days ago we observed the winter solstice, that point at which the earth's axial tilt away from the sun""for those of us in the northern hemisphere""begins to nod back in the direction of light, and warmth. At precisely this moment we experience the longest night of the year. Even as we are invited to walk in the light of the Lord""that light which the darkness could not overcome""we observe our planet begin to tilt back toward the sun, and the days become imperceptibly, inevitably longer.

In festivals all over the world this time of year people celebrate the hopeful return of the light, and warmth, and the harvest it will bring. On some level we understand the potential absurdity of the wise men on their journey, following the star of Bethlehem, because in cultures world wide we are drawn to light, especially this time of year. Our Hindu brothers and sisters celebrate Divali, or the Festival of Lights, lighting row upon row of candles in their temples. East Asian cultures observe Dong Zhi, as the middle of winter, while the midwinter festival in Hawaii, known as Hoku, occurs on the night of the full moon closest to the winter solstice. Hannukuh is the Jewish celebration of the Festival of Lights, also in conjunction with the winter solstice. Celtic traditions, from which some of our own Christmas rituals are derived often included feasting, singing, bonfires, and dancing as a way of extending life, and light, into the long winter darkness. Physical remains

in the late Neolithic and Bronze Age archeological sites such as Stonehenge, in Britain, and New Grange, in Ireland, seem to have primary axes on sight lines pointing to the winter solstice sunrise, and sunset, respectively. It seems that we are hard-wired at the level of our DNA to seek light, to follow it to the source, and to ascribe meaning to our experience of it.

The evening after our recent winter solstice, my running buddies Dave, Jack, and I decided to put on our headlamps for an "almost solstice" night trail run. As we prepared to bear our small lights into the darkness of the winter woods, I thought about those ancestors whose bonfires were lit in response to the long, dark winter nights, and in hope of a return of spring, and planting, and eventual harvest. I thought about the deeply moving, hopeful images of light shining in the darkness, and not being overcome by it. As we began to run on familiar, yet oddly mysterious trails, I found myself filled with anticipation and "oddly perhaps" hope, as our adventure began. And it may be hope, after all, that leads us to seek the light, and bear it into the darkness. Perhaps you, too, have hopeful images of light that you treasure.

Yes, the wise men followed the star "that royal beauty bright" but I suspect that their arrival in Bethlehem was not the end of their journey, but rather the beginning. T.S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi" asks some of these same questions. "Just the worst time of the year for a journey and such a long journey: The ways deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter." And Eliot's lovely, ruggedly honest imagery invites us to take that journey with them: ",And the night fires going out, and the lack of shelters, and the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly and the villages dirty and charging high prices: A hard time we had of it. At the end we preferred to travel all night, sleeping in snatches, with the voices ringing in our ears, saying that this was all folly." Was it all folly, this rough and long journey "or was there something to all this talk of a light, and a King?

I don't know about you, but I find myself connecting with the very human side of their journey. Not only were they road weary and saddle sore after having come from Persia; not only were they tired and weathered after week upon week of relentless travel, but they were ready for a celebration. They were all set for torches and feasting, merrymaking and dancing in the streets "yet when they arrived Jerusalem was as quiet as, well, a deep winter night. The wise men must have been, as T.S. Eliot suggests "haunted by the uncertainty: had their stargazing been wrong? Had this light from the heavens actually pointed to another reality, something entirely different from the birth of the "King of the Jews"? Had they journeyed all this way in vain? The only "king of the Jews" they encountered in Jerusalem was Herod. And he was no surprise whatsoever. Like many other "kings" he wielded great power, with many under his command. He had extravagantly renovated and enlarged the temple. And he was very concerned about someone out there still in diapers who was purported to be more powerful than he. Herod was no more than a vassal of the Roman Emperor, but he was a skilled politician who had secured control over half a dozen provinces. And, he was acting out of fear.

To his court the wise men came. Herod disingenuously instructed them to report back when they had found their king, and to keep it secret "a sure sign that he knew what he was doing was wrong. Herod never saw them again. "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms," Eliot writes of the Magi, "But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods."

Yes, Eliot helps us to hear this story in human terms, for is it not the case that in this sense we are all like the Magi, who, having encountered Emmanuel "God among us" cannot go back home the same way we came. No, nor is home as it was, precisely because we have changed. That light is not simply something we marvel at and observe, it becomes part of us. Like the wise men who came before us, we are those people who search for signs of hope and reconciliation and find that search to have led us here, to this place and time, amidst the ordinary and mundane.

The poet W.H. Auden wrote a wonderful and little-known poem entitled "For the Time Being" in which he suggests that Christmas has more to do with the confrontation of the emptiness in late winter than with holiday festivities in December. As we move from the Christmas season into Epiphany this seems a cautionary "and deeply honest" reading. Curiously, Auden uses humor to make his point, suggesting that honest moral reflection occurs often in the presence of our ability to laugh at our human finitude, vulnerability, and foibles. Indeed, somewhere between Jerusalem with its narcissistic self-righteousness, manifest in the form of Herod, and the humility and even comedy of the scene in Bethlehem, Christ meets us where we live most of our lives. He meets us as we go back home by a different road. Even Auden's title, For the Time Being, evokes the period in which we all live, the flat stretches of our lives: Our time; Home; The day-to-day world which never quite measures up to the Christian ideals or Hollywood portrayals. "Now we must dismantle the tree," Auden writes, "putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes, some have got broken, and carrying them up to the attic, we have

attempted quite unsuccessfully to love all our relatives, and in general grossly overestimated our powers. As in previous years we have seen the actual vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility, once again we have sent Him away, begging though to remain His disobedient servant. In the meantime, there are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair, irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem from insignificance." For Auden, the "Time being is the most trying time of all." It is precisely the ordinary time in which we all live, dear one's, that is redeemed by Emmanuel, God among us. I suspect that the wise men returned home to their versions of the mundane, but they took a different road.

And, we can too. On the night of our recent winter solstice trail run, my friends and I were entranced by the mystery of familiar terrain, at an unfamiliar time, and by the simple yet profound act of bearing light into the darkness of deep December night. Somehow, familiar trails we had run together many miles in daylight seemed transformed at night. And, in a small way, so were we. Somehow the ordinary seemed full of wonder, and the moon, almost full, lit the forest of pine, oak, and beech. The trees seemed luminescent in a silvery glow in the Beech cove where we paused, alongside a lovely singing stream. We paid attention to the small miracle of the patches of woods illuminated in the penumbral glow of our headlamps. Our sense of wonder, borne of imagination and mystery, was alive again. And, suddenly, incredibly, on a long uphill stretch of trail we saw first one, then two, then twenty other headlamp bearing runners coming our way, lighting the darkness—fellow sojourners on the trail, each bringing his or her light into the mystery and wonder of that solstice night. And this is so often how it goes isn't it? We think we are alone, and that the new way home will be a lonely one, and then we discover that following a star, in hope, has opened up a whole new world of community. Perhaps the other road home is as close by as our openness to imagination, and wonder, and adventure, and the mystery of creation, seen now in the glow of the light of Christ. Perhaps even that old familiar road is different, because we are different.

My sisters and brothers, it is our moral obligation as Christians to be co-participants in the good but difficult work of redeeming today, here, now, this moment, with grace, humility, gratitude, and humor, in "the time being." It is in the sometimes messy everydayness of our lives that the Word Made Flesh graces us. The self-deception that masks our anxiety and fear—just as it did for Herod—can be transcended by such virtues, and this reminds us that human finitude is precisely where God seeks us out and finds us. It reminds us that God comes to us in those moments when we are most human, most fully ourselves, most vulnerable, and redeems the everydayness. All we have to be willing to do is engage the journey in joy, and mystery, and hope. And then we have to pay attention to the light in the infinite, mysterious, even miraculous variety of ways we encounter it. It may be the light of gratitude in the eyes of a homeless woman as we serve her food, or the light in the tears of a loved one, stricken by illness, who can only mouth the words "thank you," as you bathe and shave him. It may be the slant of light on a pine scented trail in October, or noticing the way a child's laughter can brighten a dark winter day. The incarnation means nothing unless we are willing to be bearers of the light, just as Christ asked us to be, as we go home by another road. If we are open to surprise we may find the sacred in the mundane, amidst the mystery and wonder of this moment, here, and now. And, there, we might pay attention to the face of Christ in the other. As the poet Mary Oliver said "Around me the trees stir in their leaves and call out, "Stay Awhile.' The light flows from their branches. And they call out again, "It's simple,' they say"—and you, too, have come into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine." Epiphany blessings!

William F. French, "Auden's Moral Comedy: A Later Winter Reading, The Christian Century.
W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio."

Mary Oliver, "When I am among the Trees," from "Thirst."

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