

Isaiah 60: 1-9
Ephesians 3: 1-6
Matthew 2: 1-23

The Brightness of Dawn
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When I think about the education of children, I harken back to the ways my father taught me. He was less interested in giving me facts or information, and more interested in giving me tools. So knowledge began with knowing where to seek knowledge. What reference book was needed, what source was dependable, or what experience or practice would give me what I sought? Somehow, instinctively, my father knew that the “ah-hah moment” or the “eureka” moment – the dawning light of insight - was part of a voyage of discovery: a lifelong voyage whose navigational tools each individual must acquire for his or herself.

Albert Einstein wrote, in the book In The World as I See It, knowledge begins in awe. "We cannot help but be in awe when we contemplate the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if we try merely to comprehend a little of this mystery everyday." In theological language, all this is part of the Doctrine of Revelation: how do we know what we know; or how is knowledge revealed to us?

The season of Epiphany begins today, and so it is a good time to contemplate mysteries and seek insight, or revelation. Our celebration of this day traces back to centuries ago, when the church ended the Christmas season and began to preach and teach on the life of the child born in the manger. The custom was, in medieval times, for the priest to announce the date of Easter on the feast of Epiphany. As you know, the date of Easter moves around with about 5 weeks or so, and when calendars were not readily available, the church needed to announce the date of Easter, since so many other celebrations in the church year depend upon it. So, even as we leave the manger in Bethlehem, we are already looking at the big picture, the growth and life and death and resurrection of this tiny child. We begin anew our voyage of discovery: our understanding of what Jesus means to us.

And so, today, I ask, what are the navigational tools we need to begin and continue that voyage? The Gospel reading from Matthew gives me a framework from which to begin. This story of wise men coming from the East is so familiar to us, from readings and pageants and films, that we sometimes overlook some of the Gospel writer's craft in unfolding the narrative. These wise men or magi were a class or caste of Persians educated in the Zoroastrian religion, which included the study of astronomy and astrology. They may also have had contact with the Jewish population still living in Persia since the exile of several centuries before. They had many tools for seeking knowledge. In our story, they begin with a look at the heavens. They turn to the natural world for insights about God. They are not alone in this: many spiritual seekers have done the same.

The Celtic Christians of northern Europe had a practice of reading from the two books of God: the big book and the little book. The big book is the universe, all of creation that was called into being by the primal word of God. The universe emanated like a sacred vibration from God's voice, and so it becomes a text for us to read. So stars, dawning light, seasons, creatures, weather,

human relationships – all have information for us on both physical and spiritual levels. The Magi read God’s Big Book and discerned a momentous event coming, one that called them to a voyage of deeper discovery.

But discovery has twists and turns. They go to Jerusalem: a natural stop, the center of Judah, the puppet kingdom under Rome. And they start to ask questions. “Where is the child? Where is a King for us to worship.”

It is ironic that the one to hear this question is Herod, who had been appointed King of the Jews 40 years before by Rome, and then fought and clawed his way into vicious and repressive power. And it is ironic that this powerful man was frightened of a child. And it is also ironic that he turns to a legitimate source of knowledge, the learned Jews of the city, for an answer.

The Celtic Christians would say that those scribes turned to God’s Little Book, the Scriptures, for knowledge. This physically little book is the counterpart and supplement to God’s Big Book. In it, we listen to God speaking to us through our ancestors in faith who have taken voyages before us. We learn about their experiences of the divine, their mistakes and misunderstandings, their wisdom, their hopes. As the Little Book speaks, we hear how God speaks in human history and the human heart.

The Magi hear these two books in turn, in stereo, so to speak, and move on, 9 miles down the road to Bethlehem. It is there that they have their “ah-hah moment”: the dawning of personal knowledge, and overwhelming joy. No longer is this a secondhand education. They are face to face with the unlikely object of their search. Their response is strange, given the ordinariness of the small child and his mother. But homage, worship, and gift-giving are completely fitting on another plane, on the level of “awe.” We see their recognition that the world has changed, a recognition that **they** have changed.

We read the results of this internal change. God speaks to them in a dream, warning them not to go home by the way they came. Having learned from the natural world, having learned from the written word, they have now internalized knowledge so that it speaks from within. In discovering the messiah, they now know who and what Herod is. A new revelation provokes an essential change in direction.

When I think of the spiritual journey of the next few weeks, the season after Epiphany, I think of the Magi’s strange journey. I think of their careful and mindful learning through many sources. And then I think about “going home by another road.” Epiphany teaches us about unexpected insights: unexpected joys and tragedies, unexpected power and fear, unexpected synchronicity and dissonance. Epiphany is about unexpected revelations that change our thinking and our direction.

Some revelations may have been staring us in the face for some time. People have been noting changes in the natural world, in the weather and the environment, that speak volumes to us, if we take time to read them. And we realize that we must change direction if we are to care properly for God’s good creation. People have been noting changes in society - the prevalence of gun violence, our willingness to live in fear – which speak volumes to us, if we take time to read them. And we realize that we must change direction if we are to care for all of God’s children. Like the Magi of the East, we may need to visit the seat of unjust powers to find the whole truth.

We may need to rethink our destinations and turn aside to notice the small and the unimportant. We need the persistence, curiosity and devotion of those Magi again.

The fact is, all of us will take voyages and roads that we never expected to travel. This is part of living: jobs change, families change, health changes. Somehow we are called to seek God on new paths...and we hope to find dawn breaking there as well. We hope to find possibilities for new mission and new life.

Turning back to the faith practices of those Celtic monks. They sometimes used to set out to sea in tiny boats, called coracles, which had no rudder. They had faith that God would guide them to the place they needed to be. Somehow, the winds and the waves had enough of a divine force that they would find holiness through that trust. I do not recommend this as a spiritual practice for any of you. I think that rudders are good for navigation. But the sense of those monks was that God was everywhere, that God was with them, that God was their companion. On clear days of certainty, on foggy days of uncertainty, in the bright dawn of joy, in the dark night of grief, God's presence is always to be discerned.

This Epiphany, I hope that we will learn to hear the call of new horizons, to learn from divine wisdom moving through our world and through our lives, and the take voyages of discovery and devotion. I hope that we will seek God, and recognize God - calling through the stars, asleep in a cradle, speaking in a dream, walking by our side.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote a poem called *Six Recognitions of the Lord*. The fifth stanza is spoken as a prayer:

“Oh, feed me this day, Holy Spirit, with
the fragrance of the fields and the
freshness of the oceans which you have
made, and help me to hear and to hold
in all dearness those exacting and wonderful
words of our Lord Jesus Christ, saying:
Follow me.”
Amen.