

“Epiphany Pilgrimage” based on Matthew 2:1-16

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As a child, I loved hearing of the arrival of the three kings from exotic lands bearing gifts for the Christ child. Today, they perplex me. Over the years, I’ve learned that only Matthew speaks of them and he doesn’t tell us much. That they were royalty, hailed from specific places, were named Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar— none of this is in scripture. It’s our attempt to put flesh on the bones of these starkly drawn characters.

Yet my biggest challenge making sense of these seekers is the fact that they are supposedly so wise. It’s absurd! If they were so wise, why did they travel hundreds of miles over the desert on this reckless journey? Why did they have any dealings with the cunning Herod, naively ready to carry out his mission? Why did they eventually defy the powerful Herod and sneak home at their peril? If they were so wise, why did they give those strange gifts to this poor child born of a peasant couple in a desolate country? Truth is, I don’t really get them. Yet I can’t easily dismiss them.

I think we put those mysterious men in our manger scenes, and dress our kids up in funny robes and tin foil crowns every year, because those strange seekers speak to us. A star beckoned them, and, though they didn’t exactly know what they’d find or where they’d find it, they believed it spoke to them of God — an epiphany, “manifestation,” God’s presence revealed in the here and now. But can this happen to us? Can we ordinary people encounter God? I think what makes this story so compelling is that it says, “Yes!”— if we’re willing to be a pilgrims.

Pilgrims are seekers, hungry to satisfy their restlessness. Theologian Richard R. Niebuhr said all pilgrims are “persons in motion — passing through territories not their own — seeking something we might call completion or clarity, a goal to which only the spirit’s compass points the way.” They’re people who’ve traded attachment to place and the impulse to abide for the desire for new horizons and the impulse to venture out. Once this awakening occurs, they grow ever more watchful for passages and moments of change offering entry into a world larger than the routine, mundane world. The magi scan the skies then jump at the chance to be witness to some far-off yet great happening.

Pilgrims make sacrifices as they leave the comfort of home for foreign “territories.” In “Journey of the Magi,” T.S. Eliot’s magi speak of their sacrifice: “A cold coming we had of it,/ 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 the camels sore-footed,/ Lying down in the melted snow./ There were times we regretted/ The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces / And the silken girls bringing sherbet.” Here there’s no mention of the star, the finding of the child, the gifts. Only the cold, distance, hardship, and regret for leaving their luxury. Joan Chittister points out that the true question of Epiphany isn’t “How many magi arrived in Bethlehem?” but “How many started out in the first place?” How many began but failed, got discouraged or sidetracked?

Pilgrimage means change. “Pilgrimage experience is radical,” says Niebuhr, “the making of perilous passages from a comfortable and too confining world into a world whose vastness we

only dimly surmised. We are deported from home, exported abroad into a hitherto unimaginable reality.” So, when we hear the magi went home by another way, this isn’t just a different route. They’ve become different people altogether.

Indeed, Eliot’s magi wonder at the change their pilgrimage wrought: “were we led all that way for/ Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly, [but] this Birth was/ Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death./ We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,/ But no longer at ease here,/ With an alien people clutching their gods./ I should be glad of another death.” The magi sought a birth but a faithful pilgrimage required loss — a death of sorts. They returned, “no longer at ease,” their world shaken, having paid the price for shedding their old selves.

Sacrifice, change, loss, death. Is it any wonder most of us avoid pilgrimages! Yet pilgrimage promises new life. In Auden’s “Christmas Oratorio” the magi tell us why they become pilgrims: “To discover how to be truthful now is the reason I follow this star. To discover how to be living now is the reason I follow this star. To discover how to be loving now is the reason I follow this star.” And they conclude, “To discover how to be human now is the reason we follow this star.” I think that’s the point of all pilgrimages: Trying to figure out how we can be fully human — whole and holy — and possess that unparalleled feeling of being drawn into a new realm where fear and despair give way to joy.

For pilgrimage is the path of joy. A path we chose to get on because we’re hungry, restless, incomplete, joyless. An epiphany path. A spiritual path. The disciple’s path. And, if we do, we get on because we have been beckoned.

I was reminded of this having my daughter Sarah home after her first semester at college. I recalled sitting with her and my wife, and dozens of other parents and their children, at our first college counselling meeting. The anxiety in that room was palpable! Anxiety about an unknown future, unforeseen obstacles, leaving home, releasing those we love into the world. We were all confronted with the new path before us; of sacrifice, change, and loss. Sound familiar? But the college counsellors gave us some advice: Breathe deeply and remember that this seemingly scary path is also about wide open possibilities, broader horizons, and realizing higher potentials. They were right. As frightening as the sacrifice, change, and loss has been, I see how this new experience is shaping Sarah; she’s been called into adulthood to seek her heart’s desire and to become a more complete human being. She’s on her own pilgrimage path.

I was also reminded of why I do what I do. Nothing’s more exciting and more satisfying to me than being with a group of people committed to facing life’s transitions with eyes and hearts open to interpreting the signs that are calling us into the new future God has in store for us, then stepping out in faith along new paths. Together, may we embrace our faith as a pilgrimage, and carry with us the same baggage as the wise men: an openness to following the sometimes obscure road signs along the way, a longing for the deepest joy that can see us through an often arduous journey, and the willingness to bring ourselves before the God who beckons us; keeping in mind that it’s the wise who go home by another way, while the foolish get lost, knowing where they are.