

Which Baby Where

Read Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

Okay, so we've survived another frantic month of getting ready for Christmas, of all those who wanted to help us run up massive credit card debts as we got ready for the "holiday season" by spending money we didn't have. After the feast we collapsed in a heap, then got our second wind and prepared to celebrate New Year's Eve. If you are like me, you were just too darned tired to stay up and watch the ball drop on Time's Square. Now, today, in a fairly unusual confluence of the calendar date and the next celebration of the liturgical year, January 6th, the traditional date of Epiphany falls on Sunday.

I'll bet you don't have a big Epiphany feast planned for this afternoon. I'll bet you didn't send anyone Epiphany cards. I'll bet you have not wrapped up a bunch of Epiphany gifts to give, your version of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. I'll bet that your credit card debt is not going to spike even higher because today is Epiphany.

In the Worship Sourcebook I found this: The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek word meaning "manifestation or appearance," and in church history this word has become closely associated with the revelation of Christ in connection with the visit of the Magi. That's enough to send us off on a little journey of our own.

The late Eugene Peterson served as a pastor in Bel Air, Maryland for about 37 years. He developed the practice of every Monday taking a long walk in the forests of Maryland. In a devotional he wrote about it. He described how his walks would begin in distraction and inattention as he was still mentally full and a bit hung over from all the details of ministry that reached a crescendo on Sunday. Then as he walked the tension would begin to drain away and he would begin to notice all the richness of God's creation around him. Insects, rocks, birds, flowers, and trees came into sharper focus to delight his soul and spirit. He once again would feast upon the beauty of God's world within which we are given to live.

The intricate details of God's creative genius surround each of us, all the time; but how often we breeze on by them with no appreciation and therefore little wonder and even less gratitude. The recovery of sight is one reason I love to walk so much.

Epiphany is a story about revelation. Have you ever had one of those moments where you finally saw something that was there all the time but you never noticed it? I have those experiences repeatedly while reading the Bible. "Aha" moments pop up constantly, even through verses that I've known by heart for many years. I find myself saying, "I never saw that before!" The information was always there; I just didn't have the insight. It's all very exciting, fun, and a bit humbling. "How could I have not seen that after all these years?"

Revelation is designed to get us moving. Epiphanies are change motivators. Signs are given to point us in a new direction. The Magi were star-gazers. They knew the night sky and knew it well. And they, being astrologers as well as astronomers were always searching for meaning in the stars. Perhaps they shared the view of many that things in the heavens and events on the earth were somehow linked with significant connections.

So the text tells us that a star appeared to them. Was it there all the time but they just never noticed it or was it a brand new sign hung there by God to make them get going? Whatever, the star was a vehicle of revelation, an epiphany. And why they believed that a new star signified the birth of a new king we don't know. And neither do we know how they drew the conclusion that the child born to be king would be the new king of Israel, other than to say that in relation to them, the star was leading them westward and after Israel there was no nation further west, unless you went all the way to Spain. West of Israel lay the waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

Let's play a little mind game together. Suppose you got the distinct impression that an important birth had occurred somewhere west of here and you came to me to see if I knew anything about it, and I said, "You should fire up your BMW and drive to Harrisburg, Pa. I've had it on good information from several esteemed seminary professors up the road in Princeton that Harrisburg is

the most likely place to find the baby. Good luck.” “Thanks Pastor Bill, we’re on our way.” So you followed your GPS and arrived in good time in Harrisburg. Presumably, the baby in question wasn’t the only newborn in town. “Which one is it and where is it?” There is more than one pediatric unit in Harrisburg. Your GPS would be of no further assistance. Finding the right baby would be like finding a needle in a hay stack. It would be like spotting a new star in a night sky that already had millions of old ones on display every night but not being sure what to do with your new sight. At this point you would need further revelation. You’d need a deeper insight.

I have on more than one occasion accused the Magi of being politically naïve, but what should we expect? They went to the capital city of Israel looking for a new king. Why would they go anywhere else? They probably thought of the new born king in political, not spiritual terms. I doubt if they had sin and salvation on their minds. Why would they have thought of Jesus differently than the Jews of that day who believed their Messiah would in fact be a military leader and reign from a political throne? And they knew nothing about Herod’s evil heart even though they might have been a little more shrewd in guessing that the birth of a new king would not be particularly good news for the current king.

All of that notwithstanding, we have to give them credit for their persistence. Once they saw the star, they got moving and kept at it until they reached their destination. I find it comforting that they, as wise as they were, didn’t do their journey perfectly. Consulting Herod was a grievous mistake that would eventually cost the lives of many other newborn babies. Not one of us, on our walk to find Jesus and on our walk after he finds us, does it perfectly. We make wrong turns. We accept advice from the wrong people. And sometimes as difficult consequences of our foolish choices mount up we get tired and just stop walking.

Sometimes when people hear that I walked 500 miles on the Camino across northern Spain they ask about the difficulty. My usual answer is that the terrain wasn’t too bad; it was lots easier than the Appalachian Trail. What was hard was

the “day-after-day-ness,” walking 16-20 miles today, then getting up tomorrow and doing it again.

In the legends that have grown up about the Camino, it is said that the early pilgrims simply followed the Milky Way to the field of stars, Santiago de Compostella. The magi saw one star and followed its direction and took energy no doubt from seeing it as a source of heavenly guidance.

Lots of us spend much of our lives just doing the best we can, making it up as we go along. We hope we’re on the right path but we’re not too sure. Those times are usually uncertain and full of worry and anxiety. Then there are those seasons when we believe we are being guided by the God who loves us and gave himself for us. That belief and that assurance makes a world of difference. We wrap our arms of belief around what so many people came to believe in the Bible, that with God all things are possible. The purpose of our walk is to work a deep change in us so that more and more we walk by faith and not by sight. At the heart of our pilgrimage with Christ the agenda is to teach us to trust.

The magi went from being guided by a star, something way outside of them, to being warned by a dream not to return to Herod. Now the guiding hand of revelation was welling up from within them. The star, an emblem of creation, was replaced by a dream, an emblem of living within a saving relationship. And they returned home by another way. Their lives were changed and the way they lived them was changed.

If you’ve truly given your heart to Christ, you too are heading home by another way. You are now walking away from all the political and religious intrigues of life in the flesh. You no longer live in a materialistic world governed by blind forces of nature and subject to capricious gods who have no real interest in your welfare. You have left fate and claimed destiny. You no longer hope to be lucky because you know you are blessed. You no longer believe in coincidence because you have begun to learn about providence. You no longer think of your problems as insignificant because Jesus has assured you that even the very hairs on your head are numbered by God and nothing about your life is unworthy of

God's loving attention. You are God's beloved child and that makes all the difference in how you walk the path of your one and only life.

I wonder what life was like for the Magi when they got back east, back home. How did their pilgrimage to worship and bless the Christ child change them? Did they still go out on starry nights and star gaze? Did they look for more signs or was the one they saw which took them so far away enough for a lifetime? Did they still see the cosmos as a huge machine which ran regardless of the foibles of little people, or did they come to understand the relational nature of all things in the light of God's love?

More pertinent for us this morning, I'm wondering the same things about me and you. If we love Jesus Christ it is because God in mercy has made him known to us. If you still remember your life B.C., before you gave your heart to Christ, how have you changed? What difference does it make that you are no longer making up your life as you go along but walking in a path appointed by the God who made you and redeemed you from sin and death? Have you had an epiphany?

Wise men and wise women go home by another way and every one of us, male or female, is on the way home. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and no one gets home to the Father except through him. He came to seek and to save the lost. He gave his life for the sins of the whole world. He came that we might have life and have it abundantly. And everything he came to do, he perfectly accomplished. In his dying breath he proclaimed from the cross, "It is finished."

How I love the parting greeting among the Irish who don't say "good-bye," but rather, "safe home." That says it all.