

Epiphany 2018

Overwhelmed by Joy By: The Rev. Laura Brekke

The Epiphany story has two sets of seekers: King Herod on one side, and the Magi (or wise men) on the other. They each sought the star and the king that basked in that miraculous heavenly glow. But the motivations for each were wildly different.

In verse 3, King Herod's motivation for seeking is made plain: "When King Herod heard this he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." The Magi come, proclaim a wondrous miracle, and the King responds to the knowledge as though they issued a threat. Not only that, but his fear makes all of Jerusalem—all those over whom he has authority—afraid. In verse 7 he calls a secret meeting of his advisors and schemes. In verse 8 he sends the Magi on their way, declaring that he too wants to pay homage to the child. But we know this story.

We know that in Matthew 2:16, Herod kills all the boy children in the region in order to secure his throne. He responds to the mystery of the star with fear, scheming, and eventually rage. He understands the star as a threat to his power and control, and so he misses the very miracle of God in his midst.

The Magi seek differently. They are kings or scholars from the East; from a land and a people beyond Israel and beyond the Jewish religion. They are astrologers who use their education and their resources to fund a quest to follow the miraculous star to Bethlehem. They are men of means. They offer gold, frankincense and myrrh—which were the gold, platinum, and diamonds of their day—without expectation of a blessing in return. And yet, they seek not out of a need to control, but out of a sense of joy. In verse 10 the text reads: "When they saw the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." *Overwhelmed with joy.*

What a radically different response to God's miracle in the world! The Magi were not afraid of God's awesome power, or of the kingship prophesied about the child. They were not threatened or made insecure in their earthly wealth or authority. They were seekers who sought for the pleasure of the seeking and were rewarded with abundant, overflowing joy.

There is much that can be made of the two responses to the miracle and mystery of the star. Do we fear God's miracles or delight in them? Are we comfortable with the destabilizing effect of mystery, or do we seek to control it? Is God's power a threat to our earthly power? Do we seek Jesus for power or control, or do we seek out of the sheer delight of finding him and knowing him? Do we seek and pay homage without expectation of a blessing or a reward?

St. Anselm of Canterbury, an 11th century theologian, coined the phrase "*fides quaerens intellectum*" or faith seeking understanding. The Magi are a perfect illustration of this concept. They have faith that the star is a miracle and that they will find a king—a holy person—at the end of it. They don't understand how or why the star arrived. They don't scheme or seek to control the star, the child king, or the miracle. They have faith, and they go in search of understanding.

Their foil is King Herod. He has faith—faith that the prophecies are in fact true and the star is a clear sign they are set in motion. But he doesn't seek understanding, instead he seeks control. He allows fear to hold him, closing his vision until all he can seek is a way out, instead of an expansive revelation. Herod is left in fear—fear that grows to paranoia and then to violent rage. The Magi, on the other hand, find a sense of wonder, of awe at the sight of baby Jesus. They are overwhelmed with joy.

Do we have faith that seeks understanding? In a world of uncertainty, are we responding with fear and the need to control, or are we responding with expansive curiosity and wonder? Do we live with fear or do we allow the miracle of Emmanuel, God with us, to overwhelm us with joy?

Learning to see what's really real by Ken Sehested

We are all familiar with the well-known text for today, of the Magi, coming from the East, following a star to Bethlehem's manger.

Note that the text doesn't say these visiting dignitaries are kings. The text doesn't say there were three of them, or that they were riding camels.

One of the most shocking facts that's hidden in the text is that these royal visitors were following a star. You see, Jewish scripture has several explicit

commandments against star-gazing, of reading history through the movement of the stars, as if all futures are predetermined. This story upholds the scandalous notion that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not constrained by tradition. Which is to say, if we are faithful to this God, we should be prepared to also be shocked by those on whom God's spirit comes to rest. And maybe shocked to find out that the ordinary circumstances of our lives are the very places where the story of redemption breaks out.

When Michael May was three years old he lost his sight in a chemical explosion. He lost one eye entirely, and the other was completely blind.

But then, 40 years later, as a result of new medical technology, he agreed to undergo an experimental procedure to try and restore sight to his remaining eye. And lo and behold, it worked. For the first time since his infancy he could see the vivid colors of flowers; he could see the mountain slope he had learned to sky without use of his eyes.

But what he couldn't do was recognize complex shapes and objects, like the faces of his children, his wife, and friends. He couldn't tell the difference between men and women. He described a cube as a square with extra lines.

The neuroscientists that treated him treated him raised some fascinating questions which this research was exploring: What would happen if a blind man got his vision back? Is it something innate or is it something we have to learn? What the researchers concluded is that vision, like language, is something that has to be learned. Vision is more than sight, because what is seen has to be interpreted before it makes sense.

At the end of the article about May's amazing recovery, he's quoted as saying: "I will never be fluent visually, but I get better the more I work at it." (*Blind man's restored vision gives new insight into nature of seeing,* Associated Press, 8.25.03)

And so do we. We bring new children into welcoming homes. We cross boundaries that separate us from our enemies. We engage in the recovery of historical memory, like what we do when we celebrate St. Nicholas' birthday. We visit the sick in hospitals, and provide comfort to those who grieve. We

provide financial support to organizations that speak up for justice, who advocate for peace. Sometimes we even risk arrest and imprisonment for the sake of the Beloved Community. And through it all, we work at practicing patience with each other, because we all have our knucklehead moments.

All these things—and many, many more—we do in order to being more visually fluent, to be able to see more clearly what God has in mind for the world, to see where the Spirit is present close by and far away, and how it is that we might follow Jesus on the road to the resurrection day.