

Epiphany—A Stepping out in Faith
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Epiphany Sunday, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary
January 6, 2008

As a newly ordained priest, people often ask me when I received my ‘call’. And while I know that they probably don’t mean it that way, it sounds like they are looking for that key moment in time when God swooped in and spoke to me and called me to be a priest in God’s church. They are looking for the ‘aha!’ moment, or my epiphany—the moment when it all became clear, when God’s plan for me was revealed, when that last piece of new information clicked and the puzzle was solved. Truth be told, call often is not like that—it is more subtle, more of a dance of me stepping out in faith, and seeing where God leads. Epiphanies happen along the way, call being revealed over time and through growth.

Today is the feast of Epiphany in the Church—the day in which we celebrate Christ being revealed to the world. But this first revelation was not accompanied by noisy celebrations or feasting or the declaration of a state holiday (at least, not then)—as one would expect for the birth of a future king. Instead of fireworks, there was a quiet star; instead of a nation in celebration, there were only seekers from outside. The revelation of the Messiah’s arrival into the world in Matthew’s gospel is low-key indeed—and if you read the entire story, accompanied by some real human darkness.

In Matthew’s gospel, the focus is not so much on the day of the birth of Jesus, but on how this event impacts the larger world and the unrelated people in it. Unlike Luke’s version, there is no mention of a trip to Bethlehem for a census, no stable, no manger, no angels and shepherds. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, period. It is merely mentioned as an introduction to the drama of Chapter 2. And while this event seems to go largely missed by those in and around it, it is noticed by strangers from afar. Strangers who act, and step out in faith.

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Now these wise men, or magoi, (or Magi, as we call them), were not Jews, or even Roman, or even Samaritans. It is thought that they were priests of a sort from Persian territories, a good distance away. They obviously studied the stars, for they noticed one they associated with this new ‘king of the Jews’—so astrology may have been one of their specialties. Such divination is forbidden by Jewish Law, for revelation is to come from God alone.

But God works in many ways—and God was working through these magi. For amazingly enough, these magi (we do not know how many) gathered expensive gifts and supplies for the journey, got ready, and set off—following a star. The journey was no doubt long, even by today’s standards; and certainly it was anything but safe. They could have gotten lost in the desert, ran out of supplies or not found a way to replenish them, or have been robbed or killed for the treasure they carried. And yet they came, seeking the one whose rising star beckoned them forward.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they began asking about this new king, assuming that such an important person would be in the capital city. Very soon, the news of their arrival and inquiries made its way to King Herod, who was a bit taken back about this. After all, he was King—and he wasn’t aware of any new ones on the way. For Herod and those about him, this was hardly good news.

You see, Herod was hardly what you might call a generous or rational king. He had curried favor years ago with the Romans, who appointed him King of this area known as Palestine or Israel. He knew in the people’s eyes, he was not a legitimate ruler. This insecurity about his throne, combined with a cruel and calculating attitude, turned Herod into an

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increasingly paranoid ruler. True, he was a great builder, and rebuilt the Jerusalem temple into a masterpiece. But he also executed many who he perceived as a threat to his power—including his own sons. He knew he was hated by many, and that if news of this new, divinely appointed ruler got out, he could be sunk. Fear gripped him, and all those in power aligned with him. Because of this new child, this new ‘king’—who appeared to him to be known by everyone outside but not him—he could lose everything. This was bad news, indeed.

But Herod needed the magi, and he could not afford to tip them off to his ignorance or paranoia. So he gathered and gave them the best information that he could, and sent them off, hoping that they would do the work of finding this child and letting him know where he was—so he could ‘take care’ of him too. Nothing, not least of all a helpless infant, was going to put an end to his worldly reign.

The magi set off for Bethlehem, and when they found Jesus, ‘they were overwhelmed with joy.’ With joy! Unlike Herod’s fearful response, these wise men of the East met Christ’s entry into their world with joy. They honored him, in word, in action, through their gifts. And then, being attentive to God’s beckoning from the very beginning, they remained attentive to the end—listening to a dream that directed them home by a different route.

There is a sharp contrast in the way Christ’s arrival into the world is received by the magi, and by Herod and his circle. One group embraced the news with joy and generosity, while the other reacted in fear and cruelty. Yes, the Messiah had come—and the world was changed forever. The magi, not tied up in the power structures of Jerusalem royalty or the Jewish temple, were more open, more perceptive of God’s arrival into the world through the child Jesus. Their vision was clearer, for it was not focused on the things of this world. Herod and the chief priests

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and scribes, those who should have been waiting and watching for the Messiah's arrival, missed it entirely—for they were blinded by fear, blinded by power, blinded by their focus on their status, the things of this world.

But before we judge Herod too harshly, we need to examine our own hearts—how do we react when Jesus comes knocking on the door of our lives? Do we greet him with joy, or do we turn tail and run? Christ beckons for us to come to him, and yet, so often we hesitate or go the other way. We know that to come to Christ, to walk the way of our Lord, is to be changed, transformed—to start being shaped to see as God sees, to have our priorities and lives more closely aligned with God's. We may lose interest in things we once held so dear, people around us may not embrace the changes that we undergo. All change is loss, so it is said—and with Christ, change is gain as well.

The magi were called wise men for a reason—for they were wise enough to perceive God's action in the world, and wise enough to act in faith and not fear. They answered God's call to them, recognizing the signs that they saw as revelation—as an epiphany. God continues to call to all of us as well, revealing God's self through the people and places and events of our lives.

All we need do is pay attention for those epiphany moments—and step out in faith.

Amen.