

January 3, Epiphany Sunday: Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6

If all it took was a star to compel a person to Bethlehem, the Magi would arrive to see a multitude.

December 22, 2015

"What made you and your husband decide to adopt children in the foster care system?"

The question came from a professor I didn't know well. She wasn't my professor, not even in my department—just someone I saw around the building. I don't remember why we were talking that day, but I do remember her question, and my reply: "God."

Perhaps it was an odd response, but it was the only honest one. To say I didn't know would have been a lie. But it also would have been less than truthful to lay out all the reasons that I thought might make sense to someone: social obligation, room in our life for children, wanting to care for the vulnerable, an entirely rational fear of pregnancy. Not that those reasons weren't mixed in there somewhere, but the only honest answer to her question was "God."

God did not lead us to adopt in any big and dramatic way. There was no voice from heaven, no angelic visions, not even a series of inexplicable coincidences. Just a dim gleam on the horizon, a slow but steady wind blowing in a certain direction, an accumulation of prayers and conversations that seemed to nudge us down this one blessed and treacherous path.

I wonder how the magi would respond if we were able to ask them about their blessed and treacherous journey. "So, you supposedly wise men, why did you leave the security of your home for the discomfort and danger of a desert trek? What prompted you to pack the saddlebags, load up the camels, and head out toward a foreign land?"

“A star,” they might say. Which is partly true, but it can’t be the only answer. Because if all it took was a star to compel a person to Bethlehem, the magi would arrive to see a multitude bowing down before the young king. Instead, there is no one else. Even the priests and scribes of Jerusalem—the ones who should be the first to know—are unaware that the Messiah has been born.

So why do the magi make the journey? The star, yes. And the years of study and observation and dumb luck that allow them to notice the star. And the curiosity they have about foreign people and distant lands. And the money that means they can buy the gold and frankincense and myrrh and camels. And their physical health and understanding spouses and a hundred different nudges that lead them, exhausted and searching, to Herod’s palace.

When we think of epiphanies, we tend to idealize the sudden revelation, the moment of knowing, the one thing that launches us confidently on our journey. “Arise; shine,” says the writer of Third Isaiah, “for your light has come!”

I imagine the captured Israelites expect their return home to be an epiphany—an immediate burst of light to drive out all the darkness of captivity and exile. On their long trek from Babylon to Jerusalem, it is this glorious vision of camels and wealth and light that pushes them through the hot days and shelters them during the frigid nights. They walk toward scenes of jubilant parades, “welcome home” banners stretched across gleaming cobblestone streets, their old houses ready and waiting, their old jobs available for the retaking, their old friends gazing toward the horizon with open arms.

That’s the kind of epiphany we want—the shining light, the voice from heaven, the glory of the Lord, the gleaming star. Before we pack our bags for the long journey, we want to know we are heading out on the right path.

But when the Israelites arrive in Jerusalem, there is no parade. There is no wealth streaming in. There is only a rundown city, a temple in ruins, and the glory of the Lord. There, amid the collapsed buildings, are glimpses and glimmers of divine light; there is the sureness of home; there is a knowledge that even though their destination is not as they imagined, it is indeed where God has led them. And their hearts rejoice.

The magi’s star is a faint light—tricky to notice, hard to follow. They make it as far as Jerusalem before they have to stop and ask directions. Then, thanks to Herod, they

continue on to Bethlehem and find the place where the star rests, where the king is.

Only the king is a child—which must seem odd, must make them rethink their gift selections. Still, despite the dim, fickle nature of the light, despite the age of the boy, despite the exhaustion of their camels and the blisters on their feet, they know that this is where God has led them. And they are overwhelmed with joy.

When people ask “why”—Why did you leave a life of comfort? Why did you head out into the desert? Why have you come here of all places?—we want to give a good and reasonable answer. We want to say, “I followed a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.” Or, “this is where I see the glory of the Lord.” Or, “we observed the star at its rising.” A voice came to me as I was studying scripture; my spiritual adviser said it; it was written in the sky.

But we usually can't say these things. And even when we can, they do not represent the whole truth.

Why do we take the journeys we take? Why do we choose paths that wind us through stress and discomfort and heartbreak? Why do we move toward one particular dancing light when the sky is full of stars that are brighter, more steady?

There are many answers we can give. But if we are honest, we must simply say “God.”