

January 6, Epiphany of the Lord: Matthew 2:1-12

If people can approach the faith without thinking they already know what it is, they might hear the good news for themselves.

December 7, 2016

Would the Magi have been as interested in finding this newborn king if they had only to go around the corner?

Twenty years ago, on a solo journey to Cusco, Peru, I learned that traveling can be a pilgrimage and not just a trip. Though I had moments of loneliness and uncertainty, I felt myself held in the hands of a beneficent universe. Curiosity pushed me past my inhibitions to talk with strangers. I chatted with bus drivers and schoolchildren. I let go of my assumptions and my adult need to know without asking, and I let my inner three-year-old ask *what* and *why* and *how*. Without a fixed agenda I could go the nearby village of Pisac, sit in the town center, and watch as the market vendors set up and called greetings to one another. Getting lost was just a chance to meet someone new. I learned to follow directions one turn at a time. I couldn't rush.

I wonder if that is what it was like for the Magi when they visited Bethlehem. Did they wander the town in wide-eyed wonder? Did they try the food with both caution and eagerness? Did they delight in new combinations of bright colors or the beauty of muted shades? Did they stand entranced by the notes of an unfamiliar musical instrument? Did the pungent aroma of foreign spices fill their nostrils? Did their curiosity about strange customs push them past their good manners to ask probing and maybe personal questions? Did they find themselves at the mercy of strangers? Did freedom from their familiar surroundings open them to the mystery of the divine?

Jennifer is an active member of my church in suburban Chicago. She's there most Sundays, which I can't say for most of the congregation. She's taken on major projects and helped with artistic events; she sings in the choir. But every time I

invite her to a Bible study, a spiritual book discussion, or a class on a “Christian” topic, she turns me down. Yet last year she dove into Dahn Yoga. This summer she spent an evening with people who channel spirit guides from former centuries. Recently she invited me to a shamanic healing circle that promised to unlock my calling and highest potential, enabling me to trust my inner guidance and listen to my soul’s desire to live a more balanced, peaceful, and passionate life.

It’s not that Jennifer is uninterested in growing spiritually. She’s just uninterested in growing spiritually in the church.

I officiated a wedding as a favor to someone. The couple was reluctant to use any scripture. Instead they asked me to read a portion of Aristophanes’s speech from the *Symposium*, a speech about human beings being originally created with four arms, four legs, and a head with two faces and then split apart by Zeus and condemned to spend their lives in search of their other halves. They said they just didn’t “believe the Bible.” I don’t think they believed the Plato quote either, at least not in the way they assumed I believe scripture. Their distance from Plato’s words freed them to engage it like they would poetry. What they thought they knew about Christianity told them that scripture’s meaning is fixed and absolute.

Has familiarity with the Christian faith bred boredom or even contempt? I don’t think Jennifer is alone in thinking she already knows what she’ll learn in a study at church, in being not particularly curious about it.

When I was a new pastor, I could feel the air in the room change whenever I “came out” as clergy. Whoever I was talking to would explain the problems they had with Catholic or Pentecostal or Lutheran teachings. They would apologize for not going to church, and for swearing. Now, almost 20 years later, the response to my vocation has changed: it’s a bit like I’ve announced that I’m a classics professor. There might be mild curiosity, but I observe less and less discomfort. Generally people don’t see what I do as being relevant to them.

I think this could be good news for the church. If people are able to approach the Christian faith without thinking they already know what it is, they might discover something new. They might hear the good news for themselves.

I spent part of my summer renewal leave at the Iowa City Summer Writing Festival. One of my teachers, the poet Diana Goetsch, said that if we weren’t surprised in our writing, then we weren’t really writing. If we didn’t discover something we hadn’t

known before—stumble on a new insight or thought—then what we were doing wasn't writing, at least not writing that mattered. I realized that in my sermon preparation I had been leaving out any possibility for discovery. I had known what I was going to say before I started the sermon. No wonder I was bored. Unlike the Magi following the star to Bethlehem, I wasn't going anywhere new. My sermons were trips down the well-worn paths of memory lane, not pilgrimages into unknown woods.

We began every class by revisiting Robert Bly's explanation of the poet William Stafford's theme of the "golden thread," which Diana called the Rosetta Stone of the inner practice of writing. Bly quotes Stafford saying that "the stance to take, reading or writing, is neutral, ready, susceptible to now." This is the stance of the traveler, the stance of the spiritual seeker. Preachers make much of the Magi going home a different way. I wonder if we also need to seek Bethlehem by uncharted routes?