

Epiphany **January 8, 2012**
Matthew 2:1-12 **“Will You Come and See the Light?”**
The Revs. Michelle Slater and Debra Bowman

In our house, I always wait until January 6th, the festival of Epiphany, before putting all the Christmas decorations away. The Christmas season doesn't feel really complete for me, until the full 12 days of Christmas end with Epiphany. Epiphany: the celebration of the Magi, the Wise Men, finally arriving to greet the newborn king they were looking for, the one whose coming was signalled to them by a powerful new star in the sky. *Epiphany*, when people saw for the first time, that Jesus was Emmanuel, God-with-us, which is really what Christmas, and the whole Christian story, is all about.

So I spent yesterday afternoon taking down the tree, packing up the ornaments, the nativity sets, the stockings, the lights, and I felt pretty low while doing so. Maybe it's the emptiness of the rooms once all the magic has been packed away. Or maybe, it's the extreme dreariness of these days, when going outside can feel like someone set off a cosmic fire sprinkler. And it's so dark, all day, and so cloudy, all night, that I couldn't see the brilliant light of a new star even if it did appear outside my window.

Yet as I moped around, sighing as I placed each ornament in its box, I was reminded of how much of the Christmas story does take place in the dark. Joseph, Mary's betrothed, is told by the angel Gabriel in a dream, in the dark, not to be afraid to take the pregnant Mary as his wife, to claim the child as his own. The shepherds are watching their flocks "by night" when the angel chorus informs them of the Saviour's birth. The Magi travel by night, following a star in search of the newborn king.

And there is darkness of a different kind, the darkness of danger and fear. For Mary and Joseph, it was the darkness of a pregnancy filled with ambiguity and uncertainty...a risk of public disgrace, of speculation over the baby's legitimacy, of shaming and exclusion. Then there was the even greater darkness of their larger situation: among the poor of the earth, living in a land occupied by a foreign power.

T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Journey of the Magi* seems to give a sense of that darkness. In it, Eliot imagines the hardships the Wise Men undergo as they follow the star for hundreds of miles. In the poem, one of them says,

"A cold coming we had of it, / Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey: / The ways deep and the weather sharp, / The very dead of winter' . . . / And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters, / And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly / And the villages dirty and charging high prices: / A hard time we had of it. / At the end we

preferred to travel all night, / Sleeping in snatches, / With the voices singing in our ears, saying / That this was all folly.” (lines 1-5, 13-20)

“This was all folly.” It’s easy to wonder, once the tree has been taken to the chipper, the cookies consumed and regretted, the sweater taken back that doesn’t quite fit, if it was all just a fairy tale. A beautiful story we tell ourselves, each December, about real justice, and enduring hope; about miraculous new life, and unquenchable joy; about true and lasting peace and God’s actual, tangible presence with us. A wonderful story; a magical story; but a story nonetheless. Sometimes, once all the magic has been packed away and we return to our daily routines with a sigh and even some relief, it’s hard to keep following the star. When we look again at our lives, our communities, our world, and see the great darkness that continues to hold sway, we might even wonder, with the Wise Men, if indeed it is all folly.

As we sang *O Little Town of Bethlehem* on Christmas Eve, we declared that *‘the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.’* The hopes of all the years, yes. But the fears are also encountered. On that holy night fearful forces were roused awake with the movement of the shepherds and the song of the angels, with the cavalcade of the magi and the intrigue of Herod’s palace. The star in the east was a sign that a new king was born; a new king of the Jews was in ascendancy. Bad news for Herod. Seditious news for the Romans. A revolution is anticipated. The forces of resistance are afoot.

In the night the magi are warned in a dream to not return to Herod, to not report back to the threatened king. Wisely, the Wise Men return home by a different road. Our reading for today stops at their departure. But the story doesn’t. *“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Wise Men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, ... Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Rama, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are not more.’ ”* (Matt. 2:16-18, Jer 31:15)

The massacres of the Crusades, the World Wars, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the Bosnian conflict, south Sudan, Syria – the hopes and fears of generations of years are illuminated when the light of God’s justice appears on the horizon. Herod, the Empire, strikes back, to crush those reaching for the light, stretching for the star. Is our hope for the holy, our reaching for the heart and realization of God, our search for light in the darkness, truly all folly?

Or is the mystery of faith itself a paradox, a tension that holds two opposites together: knowing and unknowing, trust and anxiety, light and darkness? It turns out that “the light of Epiphany both illumines and darkens. The star produces a

shadow; it evokes the human worst even as it testifies to the divine best. And so the thick reality at the heart of all doctrine is iterated; there is good news of great joy to all people, wonderful comfort to those who are eager to receive God's gift and reign. But woven into this comfort is a dangerous element that will unite Herod and Pilate and even Caesar – and all those who refuse to receive or yield to this reign of God." (Thomas Steagald, 'Blogging Toward Epiphany: A Life and Death Matter', *Christian Century*, Jan. 3, 2012)

Maybe it is the coming of the light that throws the darkness into greater relief. Maybe it is the vision of God with us, God's justice made manifest, God's peace reigning, God's hope sustaining, that makes all the ways and places that is not yet a reality seem so dark. Perhaps it is not that the road to the stable and the hope of the baby are folly... but are in fact, the true reality.

Or to put it another way, maybe faith itself *is* a kind of folly – a holy foolishness that refuses to submit to conventional wisdom, the voices calling us to consume more, hoard what we have, cling to what is safe and secure, shut out what is new and different and challenging, what will require all that we have and all that we are.

Like the Magi, maybe we too are waking up from a dream. Maybe we have been asleep for some time; lulled into a deep slumber, assuming that things would always stay the same, that the white, Eurocentric, English-speaking mainline Protestant church would always reign supreme. Maybe we've been asleep to the truth that creation is always changing, that God has not finished with us yet. And now, maybe, a dream has come to us. Like the Magi, we have been warned in the night that the familiar path, the known path, the well-trodden path of comfort and familiarity, of the ways we always do things, is not the path that takes us on the Way with Christ. Maybe we are waking up to the realization that God's kingdom does not come without cost, without commitment from us, without our participation and our risk. Maybe the dawn breaks with our realization that big buildings and bulging Sunday Schools and huge bank accounts are not necessarily signs of the kingdom of God fulfilled.

As we begin intentional conversations with our four nearest United Church neighbours about a shared future together, we are heading down a different road. Not even a road, really; more like a barely discernible pathway winding through any number of other pathways we could choose. May we be given what we need to stay together on the way and stay committed; to call out encouragement; to point out signs of the lights; to offer support rather than criticism when it gets hard; to sing songs of trust in God and in each other when we hear the voices crying, 'folly, folly'. May we travel confidently, trusting that whatever path seems right, whatever way is deemed faithful, will be a way on which God's light will lead us and God's radiance will greet us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.