

“Journeys, Part 1”

Matthew 2:1-12 & Isaiah 43:19-21

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Prayer for Understanding God of starlight, we long to follow you. Like the Magi, we want to pick up the hems of our robes and run in your direction. We want to kick up dust with our feet and make a joyful ruckus following your guiding star. Unfortunately, the stars can be hard to see from here. Your still, small voice can be hard to hear from here.

So just as you guided the Magi, guide us. Draw our attention to your Word. Reveal what it is you want us to hear today, so that we can follow you. With hope in our hearts we pray, Amen.

John O’Donohue writes: “Though your destination is not yet clear. You can trust the promise of this opening; Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning.” Our lives unfold with many unexpected twists and turns. Unfurl yourself into the grace.

Today is Epiphany Sunday when we celebrate journeys and insightful moments. A definition of Epiphany is a sudden, intuitive perception of reality, or meaning of something, usually initiated by a simple, commonplace occurrence.

The Biblical illustration of Epiphany is people going on journeys to experience God. The carol speaks of three kings although there is no mention in scripture anywhere of there being only three travelers or that they were kings. Different Bible translates use magi, astrologers, magicians, and wise people. The word magi is derived from the Old Persian word magus. It refers to the Zoroastrian priestly caste of the later Persian Empire. The Magi were known as astrologers who attempted to understand the relationship between humans and the powers in the universe.

We have unknown people who go on a long journey in a foreign land to experience God. They experience God through a star, through a planned journey, in Jesus, through a dream, and an unexpected alternate journey. Their journey is full of twists and turns, ups and downs, and God makes a way in the wilderness as they follow their intuition and diverge from the expected path. The gospel of Matthew tells the story: **Matthew 2:1-12 NLT “Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some astrologers from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote: ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’” Then Herod called for a private meeting with the astrologers, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!” After this interview the astrologers went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Jesus. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.”**

Epiphany is stories of people experiencing God, restoration and love. Epiphany is an invitation to be a member of the “wes” like the astrologers, magi, wise people, in our scripture. How will you join the “wes”? We will read, study and seek knowledge; we will form communities, traveling groups; we will seek insights from other cultures, religions and far away countries; we will ask questions and strive to listen; our journeys will be long; confusing; we will dance in the starlight; we will seek to worship by finding the most excellent way of love; we will go on pilgrimages to find our true self, the image of God within us and honor the way God created us by not conforming rather being unique; we will meet fearful, judgmental controlling people, we will choose love; some people will join the fearful, hateful, judgmental leaders and fret, complain and separate themselves,

we will choose to build relationships, weaving people together in love; we will get lost and need help with directions and guidance from prophecies; we will have epiphany moments, experience God, be filled with joy, wonder and awe; we will worship God; we will give with gratitude; and we will have intuitions that certain leaders intend to harm so we will rebel and take another path seeking loving restoration for all.

Life is a journey filled with unexpected ups and downs, twists and turns. We will surely encounter barriers, detours, and deterrents along the way. And if we are listening closely to God's still, small voice, we may find ourselves stepping onto a new path. If we embrace that the road is not straight, we may find liberation, freedom, and empowering messages. We will take some dead ends and grace will provide a way and a fresh path. If we are curious of the abundance of roads God offers us to explore, we will discover more dimensions of God's goodness, joy, peace, and love. God is always with us. God invites us to follow, to journey, to explore infinite joy, ever growing love, evolving blessings, and abundant life. Life is complicated, nuanced, and full of an array of God blessed paths. The Magi teach us that a faithful path can be one that resists deceptive and oppressive powers, one that follows God's light wherever it shines. The Magi show us that life is full of dreams, stars, uncertainty and unforeseen detours revealing that we do not need to have everything figured out to be filled with joy, we can have plenty of unanswered questions and still savor epiphanies, our path can be winding, every step uncertain and if one looks carefully we can see light. Sometimes, the most profound moments in life come from taking a courageous turn that leads us away from our planned routes. The Magi were willing to have their assumptions challenged and plans changed. The same is true for us. We do not have to know the way or have an obstacle-free path, because hope is what empowers our journey, love always finds a way, a light will guide us all home. The love light knows your name and goes alongside you and before you. Surely, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

We are all on a pilgrimage away from our home heaven. Our long journey is guided by light, the force of hope, the blanket of peace, the music of joy, and the dance of love. Where do you see light? How will you follow the light?

Barbara Brown Taylor said: "The Magi led me to wonder how many other religious strangers play important roles in scripture, not as potential converts...but as agents of the God who transcends religion and never met a stranger. Whether they come in scripture from Egypt, Persia, Samaria, Greece, Rome or Canaan, they enter stage left. They deliver their blessings and they exit stage right, leaving their mark on a tradition that is not their own. They are as easy to miss as the nighttime stories, but what treasure they leave behind, proof that we can bless each other across the boundaries of our tribes." Consider all the people in your life who have offered you blessings, words for junctures along the way. Have you ever received a blessing from someone from a different cultural or religious background than your own? What treasure did they leave behind?

Context is critical when seeking insights from scripture. It is also helpful to be aware of information that is associated with a scripture but is not actually in the scripture such as "we three kings" which is a nice, helpful, inspiring song and can also lead one astray. There is a great deal of information, teachings, and sermons that the church has put out on scripture over the last 2,000 years and much of it is good insightful information. And also be aware that it is one perspective, primarily a male, white perspective that sometimes wanted to manipulate worshipers. Seek out other perspectives. Every perspective is colored by both the teacher and the learner, distorted by the preacher and the worshipper. I strive to filter out my biases and I know they seep into every sermon. That is why I ask lots of questions and encourage you to do the worship work of sorting through the words to find what God's message to you is, today. Sometimes it is helpful to approach a scripture with past insights and teachings and sometimes it is helpful to push all of that aside and strive to perceive anew. Be open. Look for the insights in each perspective. Sometimes explore a individual perspective. Sometimes put the perspectives together. Think about what is happening in your life, in the world. Scripture is living Word meaning scripture has fresh insights that are relevant to specific situations today. Exploring scripture is an aspect of journeying. Spend some time off the interstate of classical interpretations exploring the side roads abundant with fresh insights awe and wonder.

Kelley Nikondeha describes how Alexander the Great brought influences of the West into eastern regions when he defeated the Persians in 330 BCE, causing Persians to long for restoration of their own indigenous practices and leadership. The Magi pushed against Hellenization of their culture and religion, working for a future restoration. Therefore, they followed the bright star into a foreign land, because they hoped that a Judean restored to the throne could have a ripple effect into the East. They longed for a Persian ruler who

would respect their Persian culture and God. Their encounter with Jesus sends them home with visions of liberation for their homeland. How does the historical context influence your interpretation of the Magi's journey?

The wise people scuttled the plan of Herod to kill Jesus by refusing to comply and taking a different route. Who has fearful, hateful, judgmental, controlling plans today? How will we scuttle their destructive plans and establish peace and love for all? Mary, Joseph and Jesus used the gold to buy safe passage to Egypt to save their lives and establish a home. Who are the refugees today? How can we provide them with safe passage and a home?

The Magi resisted political and religious corruption and created space for Jesus. Love incarnate, Jesus, is transforming the world. How will you resist political and religious corruption? How will you make space for all and truly see each person? How will you partner with God in transforming the world to be a glorious place for everyone?

We do not have to know where we are going to know that God is with us. God is doing new things. God makes ways when it appears there is no way out. God makes a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. God creates paths where none seem to exist. God invites us to embrace the new things God is doing. God invites us to move forward, learn from the past, and step into new possibilities. The prophet Isaiah proclaims: **Isaiah 43:19-21 NLT "For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland. The wild animals in the fields will thank me, the jackals and owls, too, for giving them water in the desert. Yes, I will make rivers in the dry wasteland so my chosen people can be refreshed. I have made Israel for myself, and they will someday honor me before the whole world."**

This is part one of journeys. Next week in part two, I will share twists and turns in my spiritual journey.

"Field Notes" *a poem by Sarah Speed*. "With tears in your eyes, you name all the bumps and zigzags your life has taken. With clenched teeth and a hummingbird pulse, you wake up and wonder—how did I get here? In the last 40 days of desert wandering, you say you haven't heard God's voice once. You say you miss when God was close, when God used to sing the harmony line. So you yell at the sky, begging God to drop a pin, to name the road, to draw you a map. You lament the way this life isn't easy. You ask me—was the road ever straight and narrow, or was that all a lie? But then you crest the mountain, and I don't hear from you for a while, because God was growing in the lilac field on the other side of the hill. God was scattered among the pebbles of the road you never planned to take. Isn't it amazing, you say, there are a million roads home and God walks every single one of them."

Amen