

Rev. Lacey Hunter
January 3, 2021 | Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2: 1-12
“Dreamers & Star-Followers: #homebyanotherway”
Community Church of Sebastopol

This week marks the beginning of Epiphany, the Christian liturgical season between Christmas and Lent. Epiphany, meaning “an experience of sudden and striking realization, an intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something.” Epiphany stems from the Greek “epiphaneia,” meaning “appearance or manifestation (especially of deities appearing to worshippers), and “epiphainein,” meaning “to show forth or display.” On Christmas we celebrated that God had the radical grace to become human. Today, in the Epiphany story of the three Magi, we celebrate that foreigners and dreamers and star-followers, and a star, against all odds, had an encounter with the Divine that revealed something about the essence of the world, and it changed them. Epiphany: encounter, revelation, transformation – today this is our journey too.

In reading this Epiphany story again this year, I find myself lingering with the last phrase: and they went home by another way. The encounter and revelation of epiphany changed them, it transformed their journey. They believed their dreams and knew they couldn’t go back. Not going back. Home by another way. This journey of epiphany – encounter, revelation, transformation – echoes so much of how I am experiencing this time in our world. I am struck by all that we have encountered in this global pandemic, all that COVID has revealed to us about the essence of this world, the worst and best parts of our humanity shining all around us. These days we are living in, not unlike the Gospel of Matthew, are overwhelmed by violence and loss, and overflowing with creative intuition and humanity’s capacity to awaken to and transform the world around us. As we enter this new year with the hope of a vaccine, I hear these epiphany questions echoing: How has COVID changed us? How are we being called to go home by another way? What kind of world do we want to return to? I sense that there is a lot in this scripture that we can look to, to help guide us, to more fully understand this moment, the world today and new possibilities for the future. So let’s dive a little deeper into these epiphanies in Matthew and notice what legacies they have for today.

Today’s story begins with a star. A star is who encounters Jesus first, not a rabbi or a Roman official, a star, perhaps revealing an essential relationship between God, humanity, and all of creation. This star is who shines down the possibility for future encounters.

The star was understood as a sign of a new “King of the Jews,” yet it is unlikely that these travelers were Jews coming to bear witness to ancient prophecies. Rather the Magi, who first followed the star, are understood by some Biblical scholars to refer to a caste of non-Jewish—priests from Persia who could interpret dreams. Others have translated “Magi” to refer to foreign Kings, perhaps painting a complicated and surprising scene in a land ruled by Imperial Rome. Whoever the Magi were, it seems clear that they represented something surprising, something essential about how God’s presence crosses borders that once divided, be it religious borders, or borders of cultures and empires. Through their encounter, these borders are blurred and transformed, these lives now shared in community as the Magi arrive on this humble scene to

offer their unique gifts. In the journey of encounter, revelation and transformation, the gifts from the Magi are a series of epiphanies, each a testament to the kind of person the Magi believed Jesus to be and the kind of life he would live.

As we learn from this story and ask ourselves about epiphanies emerging in ourselves and in our world today, I think it would be unwise for us to ignore King Herod's response. Herod also encountered the star and believed the Magi when they said the star revealed that a new king had been born. What Herod failed to grasp though, was the transformation that this encounter held for him. While the Magi were overjoyed at the revelation that God was more like a child than an empire, Herod was terrified. From this place of fear, Herod pulled his resources in close to him, clinging violently to his power. However painful it might be to imagine, we too have it in us to respond as Herod did from a place of fear and control. When faced with epiphany opportunities to encounter God and be transformed, we too have perhaps responded by ignoring the dreams, by clinging to powers and systems that feel familiar, systems that have kept some people secure while silencing the stars that are shining down new possibilities for a more just and gentle world.

After greeting the baby Jesus, had the Magi intended to return to King Herod and tell him of the birthplace? Herod was king in the land they were traveling through. It is reasonable to imagine they felt some kind of obligation to do as he asked. However, through their encounter with Jesus, something in them opened up and changed their course. By returning to their homes by another road, the Magi reveal that Herod and the Roman empire's power was not total, their joy could not be controlled, the possibilities they encountered with Jesus could not be destroyed. The birth of Jesus was a disruption that set ablaze stars in the sky and manifested dreams that could not be ignored. Dreams that set people on a new path all for the sake of love and life. And they went home by another way. These are the epiphany legacies that we have inherited through our Christian faith.

COVID is a devastating disruption that has set ablaze stars in the sky and manifested questions for our humanity that cannot be ignored. These questions can set us on a new path all for the sake of love and life. How has COVID changed us? How are we being called to go home by another way? What kind of world do we want to return to? If you were to write that epiphany story, what story would you tell? What guiding star shimmers above? What is being revealed, made manifest in our midst and how are we responding to it? testifying to it? What dreams are calling us and how are they asking us to return home by another way, to not go back? What impossible way opens up ahead? What then?

I'll share with you some of what I see. I see stars with #s in front of them. Stars like #BlackLivesMatter that shine down the possibility of a world where Black lives are affirmed, beloved, sacred.

#NoBodyIsDisposable shines down the possibility of a world where every body receives the care, nourishment and resources needed for flourishing.

#CareNotCages shines down the possibility of a world where we do not lock away God's beloveds but rather tend to and transform pain and conflict.

#EssentialWorkers shines down the possibility of an economy that cares for its workers rather than exploits them.

I see all these stars shining down on a hurting world, radiating a sign of Love, pointing to a way of life that is liberating. These stars are spreading the news far and wide, reminding us how sacred our bodies are and what divine futures are possible. Such a world exists. When the vaccine comes, this is the kind of world we could return to. If we set out and listen to the voices of the dreamers, we will find ourselves kneeling in the presence of God on earth.

I believe it is the season of Epiphany for a reason. Now is the time to open our eyes to the stars overhead. May we too, open ourselves to the epiphany stories of today. May God's persistent presence among us embolden us to claim that God's kingdom is possible. May we proclaim, "the Magi left for their own country by another road," as our commitment to make the future just and sacred for all. Amen.