

Wonder Filled Epiphany

One of my favorite childhood memories is camping out in my backyard with my dad. We didn't use a tent, typically. We'd just lay out a tarp, and put our sleeping bags on top of that, and sleep under the stars.

I can still vividly remember lying there, staring at the sky, as slowly darkness would fall and tiny lights would begin to appear, and before I knew it, it was night and the vastness of the cosmos would open up before us. We'd pick out familiar constellations and make up stories about going to visit the moon and I'd try to count all the stars in one little section of the sky so I could multiply it by all the other little sections of the sky to figure out just how many stars were up there, but I never could because every time I looked at that little section it seemed like there were more stars than there were before.

But mostly we'd just lie there silent, in awe and wonder. I'd wonder about the universe. I'd wonder about the God who could create something so big and yet also so small as the lightning bugs that flew around us. I'd wonder about the light of those bugs and the light of the sky and the love of my dad and how amazing it all was.

Every once in awhile, we'd see a shooting star, and oh, the rush of excitement I'd feel when I'd catch that unexpected blaze of light streaking across the sky! Eventually I'd doze off, dreaming of the wonder of it all.

Of course, a few hours later, I'd wake up, cold and uncomfortable on the hard ground, and I'd end up going inside and spending the rest of the night in my warm bed and then I'd be tired and grumpy the next day for not having gotten enough sleep—but none of that mattered because the night before I had gotten a glimpse of the infinite.

I like to think that the Magi, the wise men that we hear about in today's gospel, were similarly taken by the majesty and wonder of the night sky. That they began their life's work with a wonder about the cosmos that never quite dissipated even as they studied the sky night after night. Even as they sketched out the predictable patterns of the shifting sky, the logic of the language of these glowing gases inching across the darkness, I'd like to think that they were still gripped by the vastness and the wonder of it all.

These wise men must have been wonderers. They weren't really kings, as we tend to portray them. They were more likely astrologers, "priestly sages from Persia." They looked to the sky to make sense of what was and what was to be.

They had to have been people who wondered when this new light appeared, that unexpected blaze of light! Surely they dreamed of the wonder of it all, of the cosmic implications of this glimpse of the infinite.

And this wondering led them to wander. Yes, these wise men were wanderers. But not the Dion kind of wanderer who roams around, around, around. I mean the kind of people who are willing to set out on a journey not really sure where exactly it will take them, but trusting enough that this holy pilgrimage is worth taking.

In our Sunday school Christmas pageant image of this scene, the wise men show up at the manger just a few minutes after the shepherds, and I think we maybe imagine that they just set their astrological GPS and got there no problem. But the reality is that we don't know exactly when the Magi showed up. It could have been as much as two years after Jesus' birth.

And the other thing we sometimes overlook is that they didn't get the location right the first time. These guys came from the east, they followed the star, but as they got closer, they started to wander. They ended up being off by a few miles. They went to Jerusalem.

And why wouldn't they go to Jerusalem? They were wondering and wandering in search of a new king. Of course they'd go to the halls of power to find a king. But, as they'd learn, that is not where the true king would be found.

Ernesto Cardenal was a priest in a small village in Nicaragua. He tells the story of how every week he would read a passage from the Bible to the people in his congregation, all of them poor peasants, and then they would discuss this passage, saying what they heard and what they thought. When Father Cardenal read this story of the wise men from the East who went to Jerusalem looking for the new king of the Jews, Adan, one of these impoverished Christians said,

"It seems to me that when those wise men arrived they knew that the Messiah had been born and they thought Herod knew about it and that the Messiah was going to be a member of his family. If he was a king, it was natural that they should go to look for him in Herod's palace. But in that palace there was nothing but corruption and evil, and the Messiah couldn't be born there. He had to be born among the people, poor, in a stable."¹

What this humble Christian was saying was that the wise men simply assumed that a king would be born in power and glory, born in the royal palace, but it turned out the savior of the world was not to be found in Herod's house in Jerusalem. They had to wander a bit more.

But rather than wander aimlessly, these men inquired in town, "Where is this child who has been born king of the Jews?" Now if you want, you can insert a sexist joke here about wise men not being afraid to ask for directions—I'm not going to do that here—I'm just going to say that actually, they probably should have been afraid to ask for directions anywhere near King Herod.

For Herod the Great, who was the Roman-appointed King of the Jews, was growing old, and in his aging he had become a mentally unstable tyrant, who ruled through fear and cruelty. He was so insecure about his standing that every whiff of palace intrigue and potential opposition threw him into a murderous rage. He even killed one of his wives, several of his children, and other members of his own family, fearing that they were plotting to betray him. When Caesar Augustus heard what Herod had done to his own family, he is reported to have said about Herod, "I'd rather be his pig than his son."

And so when Herod hears about these wondering wanderers, he trembles with fear, because he knows that whoever this new king is, he is a threat to his own illegitimate power. And he jumps into action, sending the Magi off to do his reconnaissance work for him. Herod has no interest in wonder, only in power and control and the certainty of his own prominence.

And we know how the story goes from here. The wise men were guided once more by the star to Jesus, where they discover the meaning of the star not in the corrupt halls of Herod's power, but in the midst of everyday life.

The Messiah had to be born among the people. Among the poor and the lowly.

¹ Quoted by Tom Long, "The Wrong Town at the Wrong Time," http://day1.org/8313-tom_long_the_wrong_town_at_the_wrong_time

And indeed, as Jesus grows, in his ministry he is found among the outcast, rejected, despised. Jesus, himself, says that the truly blessed ones are the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers, and it is among these little ones where Jesus is truly to be found.

That must have been a wonder-filled revelation, a wonder-filled epiphany to these wise men, who needed to wander no more.

They now had seen the very God in flesh, the true king, and they went home by another road. After any journey of significance there is no going back the same way as before.

We, here, so many years later, are not so different from those Magi. In our own wandering, sometimes we too look in the wrong place for a Savior. We look in places of wealth or power rather than in the hungry, the orphan, the outcast. We look among the successful, the winners, when Jesus can be found in the suffering, the oppressed.

And indeed, in a world that demands certainty, we are called to wonder. To sit in holy mystery and awe. To resist easy answers and embrace the messiness of life and God's work in the world. To wonder at the wider and more wonderful wisdom of God.

And so, wonderers and wanderers, let us make the journey. May our journey bring us to bow down and pay homage, to worship the newborn king. May we bow down at holy encounters in messy places, and meet Jesus in the midst of our everyday lives.