

Epiphany: Finding Christ Where We Least Expect Him

Ruth Haley Barton

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’”

Matthew 2:1

*Arise! Shine!
for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
Lift up your eyes and look around...
then you shall see and be radiant.*

Isaiah 60:1, 5

Today is the feast of Epiphany—the day when the Church commemorates the journey of the wise men to seek the Christ child. On this day we celebrate their arrival at the manger with longing in their hearts and gifts appropriate for the One who would be our king, our priest, and our Savior. In yet another strange twist to the Christmas story, these pagan astrologers were among the first and most venerated visitors to the manger. Theirs was an occupation that was expressly forbidden in Jewish law, the modern-day equivalent of those who read and interpret horoscopes. And yet they were welcomed and their gifts received!

Epiphany is about the showing forth of God in unexpected places to unexpected people. It is a season of revelation. Nothing about the circumstances of Jesus’ birth was ideal. Mary was pregnant out of wedlock. When it was time for Jesus to be born, Mary and Joseph were on the road due to political forces that were beyond their control. There

was no good place to have the baby and so they ended up in a dirty stable for this blessed event.

Beyond these intimate imperfections, the larger landscape was very bleak. Jesus was born into a time of political and religious upheaval. King Herod, an insecure and violent man, was in power at the time creating a very dangerous environment for anyone who threatened him. The wise men, for all of their wisdom, were actually more of hindrance than a help: they tipped off Herod to the fact that there was a potential usurper being born in Bethlehem. This knowledge sent Herod into a jealous rage which caused him to order what is now known as “the massacre of the innocents”—the murder of all children two years and under. It is hard to imagine just how dangerous and out of control these times were from a human standpoint. It was not a good time for ushering in a new spiritual reality in the guise of a vulnerable baby. It was not a safe environment for spiritual seeking. But Christ came anyway. And the wise men left their home country to seek this one who offered them hope.

Seek and You will Find

None of us does our seeking perfectly. But for all of their bumbling, the story of the wise men is about that great human longing for more of God than what we have right now—no matter who we think we are. Whatever the wise men had going for them back at home, they had bumped up against the limits of human wisdom to truly satisfy the longing of the human heart. This is the part of the story where those of us who think we know something acknowledge that even with all of our knowing, there is a poverty of spirit that can only be satisfied through a fresh encounter with Christ. This longing

propels us beyond the borders of life as we know it in order to discover a deeper spiritual reality.

The story of the wise men is a story about pilgrimage. It is about being willing to leave that which is familiar in order to arrive at our deeper spiritual home. It is about seeking in order to find something that we don't even know what it is until we stumble upon it where we least expect it.

But make no mistake—seeking can be a dangerous venture. The truth is, everyone in this story was in danger. None were immune to the imperfections and the vulnerability of the human condition. And the only way to make it safely through such dangerous territory was to follow the guidance that was given—whether it came from a star or an angel appearing in a dream or an inexplicable longing in the gut. Those who fared best were those who responded immediately to whatever guidance they received.

A Spirituality of Imperfection

Perhaps one of the reasons I am so attune these days to the imperfections and the dangers in the Christmas story is that I am so attune to imperfection in my own life. For all the gifts that have come to us this season—and there have been many—there is always the pain of imperfection as well. There are old wounds that get reopened so often I wonder if they will ever heal. There are places of darkness in my own soul where I cry out to God with such deep longing for light and a way ahead that sometimes I wonder if God gets tired of hearing my prayers. It takes courage to name these as real at the same time as I am celebrating the ways in which Christ is being born in my life. It takes an

almost desperate faith to keep crying out to God, asking for an epiphany—a showing forth of Christ’s presence—in that place where it seems least possible.

But this is the where a deeper kind of faith is forged. Here we learn that we can prepare the way, to the best of our ability, but in the end we cannot fix everything that needs to be fixed. And Christ comes anyway. He shows himself in the least likely places to the least likely people—including us!

I am an idealist. I am a perfectionist. I confess it freely. I spend my days dreaming big dreams, seeing great visions, trying to be perfect and trying to manage everything and everyone around me so that they are perfect. I take it far too personally when the world is not perfect and carry its imperfection as a weight on my very own shoulders. The scandal of the Christmas story for me is to see, really *see*, that Christ came into a situation that was imperfect in every single way. But the imperfection did not keep Christ from coming. His Light could not be snuffed out by the darkness all around. *His* light shone in the sky and in the manger with guidance for those humble enough to follow their deepest longing. In this most imperfect situation the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled with uncanny precision:

*Arise! Shine! For your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory shall appear over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Lift up your eyes and look around...
then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice...
they shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

And so we pray, Lord, help us to see. As we come to the end of this Christmas season and enter into the ordinary time, help us to do so with eyes that are lifted up, looking for your presence in all the places where we expect you and all the places where we don't. Make our faces radiant, not with any perfection that we think we can achieve but with your very own Presence. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

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