

“Off by Nine Miles”
Matthew 2:1-12

Today is Epiphany Sunday and we remember the journey of the wise men from the east. On January 6 Western Christians celebrate the feast of Epiphany, which takes its name from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, meaning disclosure, manifestation, unveiling or appearance. But as we remember the magi, I wonder what the story would have been like if the wise men were wise women instead? Some believe if this was the case, the wise women would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, brought practical gifts, and there would be Peace On Earth. But I am glad that the magi were not practical in that way. I am glad that they followed the stars and were able to interpret the signs to find Jesus.

Looking at the stars is one of those activities that has captivated the imagination of people for thousands of years. Stars have been used to guide travels and predict important events. We see the grandeur of God's creation every time we look at the stars. Many of us have been taught to look for the powerful and mighty deeds of God. Yet, the stars that led the magi to Jesus did not lead them to a place of power. The stars led them to a humble place. At first the wise men, or the magi, believed that the king they were looking for would be born in Jerusalem. The reason for that is the Scriptures they were following. According to biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann the magi were off by nine miles, the nine miles between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The scripture they were using was Isaiah 60 which pointed them in the direction of Jerusalem. This was the place about which the prophet wrote so that the people of Israel who returning Jerusalem from Iraq can have a word of hope as they saw the city lying in ruins. But the scripture that the biblical scholars at the time saw as the main event was not Isaiah 60 but Micah 5. This is the one that was told to King Herod. Brueggemann writes, “In his panic, Herod arranges a consultation with the leading Old Testament scholars, and says to them, ‘Tell me about Isaiah 60. What is all this business about camels and gold and frankincense and myrrh?’ The scholars tell him: You have the wrong text. And the wise men outside your window are using the wrong text. Isaiah 60 will mislead you because it suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be restored as the center of the global economy. In that scenario, the urban elites can recover their former power and prestige and nothing will really change. Herod does not like that verdict and asks, defiantly, ‘Well, do you have a better text?’ The scholars are afraid of the angry king, but tell him, with much trepidation, that the right text is Micah 5:2-4: But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old . . . This is the voice of a peasant hope for the future, a voice that is not impressed with high towers and great arenas, banks and urban achievements. It anticipates a different future, as yet unaccomplished, that will organize the peasant land in resistance to imperial threat. The Prophet Micah anticipates a leader who will bring well-being to his people, not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to the folks on the ground. Herod tells the Eastern intellectuals the truth, and the rest is history.” So, with this we see that the wise men although they were astronomers and scholars, they were still misled because their expectations were to find a king with worldly power and might. But true change does not come to our world through the power of the rich, the kings, the rulers or the military. This goes against our learned common sense.

In the Jewish magazine, Tikkun, there is a section called “Ask the Rabbi,” and a reader asked how God could have allowed a certain tragedy to happen. Rabbi Michael Lerner responds: “I don't know and there are no answers, but only responses to the question. The difference is this: an answer seeks to dissolve the question, a response recognizes the ongoing validity of the question and seeks to remain in connection with it.” Then the Rabbi suggests that we should stop “thinking of God as some big man up in heaven sitting there and making individual judgments about who shall live and who shall die, where he should put a tsunami and

where he should put a beautiful sunset. Instead, understand God as THE FORCE OF HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE UNIVERSE, the aspect of the universe that is the source of love, kindness, generosity, social justice, peace and evolving consciousness, and that this aspect of the universe permeates every ounce of being, every cell, and unifies all being.” This is what the star was redirecting the magi to. It was a sign for them to stop seeking change and hope for the world in places of power and control. It was a sign for them to see that Jesus was bringing God’s force of healing and transformation in the most vulnerable places of our human experience.

This is a very important message for us today because we are often like the magi. We forget about the importance of God’s presence in places of powerlessness. We are often off by nine miles. Jerusalem is what captivates our imagination. Even till this day when people go to visit the Holy Land, they look at the Wailing Wall and think of the glory of the temple. They often overlook the importance of Bethlehem and other insignificant places where people live even today under oppression and occupation. Reading this text this past week brought tears to my eyes many times as I was also reading the news of the Israeli raids on Gaza. Those places where Jesus was born to bring healing and transformation are still places of great suffering and pain. And yet the world often focuses on Jerusalem and other places of power. Our world looks for violent solutions to this conflict. Our world is off by nine miles! I mourn the loss of all the civilians who have been killed this past week in Palestine/Israel. My heart goes out to the Palestinian and Israeli mothers who have watched their children die or get hurt this past week. Our world is truly in need of another great epiphany or revelation where we can all see that the star is leading us into those places of deep pain and powerlessness.

It is not in the grandeur of our church services or our public acts of glory that the star leads us to find God. Our epiphanies happen in times of quiet prayer, or in the love of a friend, or the care of a community about justice. The real epiphanies of life are not found in the palaces of the rich or those in great power. The seed of change is already with us. What we need is to open our eyes and our hearts.

The story is told about a man named Paddy who grew the finest gooseberries, blackcurrants and redcurrants in the whole country. He had three fields of fruit bushes, and every day he walked round the bushes with a hoe, taking out any weeds which were growing. So the bushes had all the goodness of the soil to themselves. By the middle of each summer they were heavy with large, juicy fruit. But sadly, Paddy was not as good at raising children as he was at raising fruit. His two sons were known as the laziest young men in the country. They spent all day drinking, eating and chatting with friends. Paddy was worried about the future of his sons. He would often say, “When I am dead and gone, all my fruit bushes will become overgrown with weeds, and my sons will starve.” Living a short distance from the village in a small cave was a hermit, renowned for his wily wisdom. Finally Paddy decided to visit this hermit, to ask advice. After he heard Paddy’s story, the hermit sat for a few moments in silence, stroking his long, white beard. At last the hermit rose up, patted Paddy on the shoulder, and assured him that he would teach the two lazy sons to work. Then the hermit left his hut, and went to see the young men. He said to them, “I have something very important to tell you. I happen to know that in those fields of fruit bushes there is great treasure. It will be enough to feed and clothe you for the rest of your lives.” It was now September. From then until Christmas, the two sons went out into the fields each day searching for treasure. They dug round every fruit bush, turning over the earth, in the hope of finding a casket full of gold. But by Christmas Eve they had found nothing. So they went to the hermit and accused him of deceiving them. “I haven’t deceived you,” the hermit replied, with a grin. “You must keep searching. I promise that by next September you will have found the treasure.” The sons refused to believe him. “Very well, then” the hermit continued; “I will make a bargain with you. If by September you have not found enough treasure to buy food and clothing for you for the rest of your lives, I will share whatever I receive with you. But if you do find treasure, you must share it with the poor in this

village.” The brothers agreed. So they continued to dig the fields, turning over the earth between the fruit bushes. Paddy watched with great satisfaction, pleased that while his sons searched for treasure, no weeds would grow. Thus, by the middle of the summer, the bushes were again heavy with large juicy fruit. The hermit came to the fields to see the two sons. “Ah,” he said, looking at the fruit bushes, “I see you have found your treasure.” At first, the two sons could not think what he meant. Then it dawned on them. Over the next few weeks, the hermit helped them pick the treasure. Half they sold in the market and the other half they gave to the poor. And from then on, the two brothers, continued to work hard in the fields. Each year, they again sold half the crop and gave away the rest. And as the hermit had prophesied, the money they got was quite sufficient to feed and clothes them for the rest of their lives.

The treasure was not something sudden. It came in the ordinary stuff of life. Our epiphanies happen the same way every time the star leads us to the depth of our human experiences of pain, love and transformation. I hope and pray that we will follow the star even if it may seem that we are off by nine miles, even as it leads us away from a throne and closer to a humble manger.