January 4, 2015 Epiphany of the Lord

All Saints’ Church Year B

Isaiah 60:1-6, 9 Ephesians 3:1-12

Psalm 72 Matthew 2:1-12

I have been hanging out all week with the Magi. They’ve been on my mind, in my dreams, appearing around corners, joining me for meals, and speaking to me from the gospel text.

I first noticed that we don’t know how many magi there are. There are three gifts, but who’s to say that only one magi came with each gift. Maybe three came with each gift, maybe a family, maybe a tribe. In some ways, many magi taking this westward journey makes more sense, since no one travelled in small numbers- it was too dangerous.

I also noticed that we don’t know the gender of these magi. Matthew never refers to them as kings or men- we have just translated the Greek word, magi, into those different terms. I have always assumed men, but I like the fact that the text leaves it open. Women could have been there, paying homage to the Christ Child. Maybe one of the magi brought his family, a daughter or a son as an apprentice, to teach the child what it means to follow a sign and commit to its beckoning. What an adventure for that child!

And who are magi? What is their life’s work? Maybe they come from a priestly caste, educated with the knowledge of the stars and the planets and their orbits; scientists of their day, maybe interpreter of dreams, as well, firm in their capacity to trust not only in their intellects but their hearts and wills; maybe Zoroastrian, or maybe monk-like mystics, who pray in silence within the concentration of a deep presence. Maybe they were people who worked the land, who trusted in their hands and in nature’s signs. We don’t know.

From what part of the world do they come? Persia, Kurdistan, Arabia, India, China….we have no idea. But they come, they leave their home, their security, their livelihood to follow a star where it will take them. Is it an invitation? A hope realized? A command? A challenge? They are crossing boundaries, as they trek into unchartered territory, living in tense expectation, with watchfulness and gift-bearing responsibilities.

Their identities are being newly shaped on the journey. Enlightened by following their star, the magi, as they bow down to Jesus, experience their epiphany: “heaven on earth, earth in heaven, humanity in God, God in humanity, one whom the whole universe cannot contain, now enclosed in a tiny body.”[[1]](#footnote-1) These magi will never be the same. They have received the gift of true north.

This past Friday, I spent the day with the monks in Cambridge, at the Society of St. John the Evangelist. I was running a workshop for them on Islam and the Qur’an. We were deep in our conversation about the Qur’an’s view of sin, redemption, forgiveness, the Absolute, when one of the monks asked me how I began my journey into Islam and into the Qur’an.

And a bit flippantly, I said, “Oh, I am like one of the magi- I had a vision and I had to follow it.”

I was a bit aghast at my quick response. Of course they wanted to know more.

It all started with 9/11. Like most communities throughout the United States, we planned a memorial service for our school of students, faculty and staff, on September 14th, the Friday after that fated Tuesday. People in town were joining us. The world was mourning, and our Muslim students wanted to recite their Holy Scripture, as partner to the other Scriptures that were being included in the worship service. We had a diverse student body; open to many different ethnicities. Of course, we needed to include them. And so on September 14th, I heard the Qur’an recited for the first time. The sounds were so beautiful, so rich, and so new. I was taken in, transported to a reflective place; and then, I felt a shift; literally, the ground underneath me moved. I grabbed my chair to steady myself. For some strange reason, I was famished. My head was spinning. My eyes were watering. I was thirsty.

And then before me floated the image of a man ripping open his shirt in an anguished wail, and the earth opened up and I bent down over the rift and reached into the crack as far as my arm could go, frantically searching. My head was pressed against the rich soil, in submission. I could see a door and I needed to open it as if my life depended on it, but I couldn’t reach it. I was frantic. And then I heard a voice, “Islam, Islam, Islam.” I sat up, afraid. I was afraid that if I opened up the door, the devil would be released. I began to sweat and shake. “Don’t be afraid,” the voice continued, and then the choir began to sing, “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” and I returned to the service as if I had always been there. “Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame, from everlasting thou art God, to endless years the same.” Exhausted, I wept.

My God, a vision had seized me.

I was afraid. I sat in that memorial service, mourning for those who had died, and for our fragile future, and I also felt convicted by my own failings. I knew nothing about Islam, and yet here I was a religion teacher conversant in all of the major religions except one. I felt inadequate. But none of that really mattered. What mattered was that I knew God wanted me to open the door and follow this vision. Could I really say no?

For the past 14 years, I have studied Islam and the Qur’an and the surprising thing is that through this study I have moved deeper into my Christian faith. I understand more fully the beauty of surrendering to God: that the attributes and practice of humility, peace and prayers ***do not*** rise out of my own will, but rather out of my letting go, into God. To relinquish, to abandon, to hand over, to release, to accept, to desire all for God is the first conscious act of my life. I remind myself of this act every morning.

Though counter intuitive to the world, this act is what sets us free. No longer our will, but God’s will- God’s words, ideas, images, hopes, dreams and desires descend from the Source of all Life, and as John reminds us, God will abide in us.

I have never thought about framing this experience of this vision, in this way, but I like my new connection with being one of the magi, crossing boundaries to follow a star, a hope, and a dream. It has less to do with Islam (though I look forward to sharing with you my work these past years, but that will come later), and more to do with trusting where God is taking me, where God is taking you.

I share this with you this morning so that I can ask you this question: How are you a magi?

You are; we all are.

I would like to suggest that when we walk up to the altar to take Eucharist, it is as if we are walking into Bethlehem, following a star, bowing down to Jesus and offering the gift of ourselves. Every time we take the consecrated bread and wine, we are reminding ourselves that God abides in us and we in God. In God’s eyes, we are both the gift giving magi ***and*** we are the gifts of gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

We are also magi, when we cross into unknown territory and discover new gifts because of our faith. This happens in so many ways, in hospitals, at deathbeds, in ways we serve our community, our families, our church, in ways we struggle with new ideas or new circumstances, new diagnoses or new limitations. And the ways we find joy and hope and sustenance. I look forward as your rector to learn how you are living into this journey, opening your doors, into your dreams, and trusting in your star, and growing wise and beautiful in its light.

When we share with each other how we are like magi, we are living into Paul’s dream for us. Not only are we co-heirs and co-partakers of the mystery of Christ, but we are co-bodies, a word Paul made up (no Greek word like this). He wants us to know that as we make this journey, discovering together our inner sense of true north, we are creating a new land; we have crossed a boundary into God’s realm, and we have created something new, the Kingdom of God, heaven on earth, earth in heaven. We are set apart, as individuals, but we are also co-bodies, deeply connected, relational, as we walk together in this beautiful act of living into our faith. AMEN

1. Peter Chrysologus, from “office of Readings,” in M.A. Simcoe, ed., *A Christmas Source Book*, [Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1984], 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)