

Year B--Epiphany
Ephesians 3:1-12
Isaiah 60:1-6
Maathew 2:1-12

Home by Another Road

“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

Today is the feast of the Epiphany and the conclusion of the Christmas season. It's one of my favorite feasts of the church year, a commemoration that doesn't get as much attention as Christmas but is in many ways the culmination of the Christmas story. On Christmas Eve and Christmas day, we commemorate the birth of Jesus in the manger--God made flesh, born of a young woman, Mary. Epiphany is a part of that story. It's the day when the wise men arrive bearing gifts for the Christ child. And it's on them that we focus today.

They are led by a mysterious star, compelled by a force beyond themselves, to make the journey to Bethlehem. They read the signs, the birth they will encounter is no ordinary birth. Something extraordinary has happened, but they don't know what they will find. After a long and arduous journey, they make their way to the manger, to Jesus' cradle. They kneel before it, offering the gifts they've brought--gifts suited for a king, not a baby in a stable in a backwater town outside Jerusalem. They encounter the baby Jesus, the Christ child, God dwelling in vulnerable flesh. They meet God face-to-face. In that meeting we find the heart of what Epiphany is. If Christmas is the birth of God in human form, Epiphany is the revelation of that birth. In their encounter with the living God, The magi discover something unlike anything they've ever known. The way they thought the world was, can be no more. God revealed in flesh. There's no turning back from that, No going back to ordinary lives. What could they do but go back by another road?

There was one Epiphany celebration that forever shaped how I see this day. Six years ago I was living at a convent in Tennessee. Another recent college graduate and I shared a retreat house the sisters owned. We tended the sisters garden, cooked a meal for them once a week, and participated in their life of prayer.

The Community of St. Mary is a small order of Episcopal nuns--At the time there were only five sisters. They live their life by the Rule of St. Benedict, centered on the rhythm of daily prayer. Five times a day they gather in the chapel--morning, noon, evening, and night. The year that I lived alongside that community--my year as a nun--was one of the most formative of my life. I learned so much from those five women about what's most important--values of community, intentionality, commitment, and working through differences. They showed me what a balanced life and a commitment to prayer looked like. I learned those lessons from them gradually, but there are a few lucid moments that stand out--points of clarity that brought experiences and observations together in new ways. One of those was Epiphany.

Snow is rare in that part of Tennessee. We never got anything like what's outside now. Two or three inches can bring everything to a halt. They lack that good Yankee fortitude. The morning of Epiphany we got one of those snows. I made my way down to the chapel, just in time for 7am morning prayer. The snow began falling early that morning and there was already a half inch on the ground, crunching under my boots. Tree boughs sagged under the weight of it. I got to the door of

the chapel and looked inside. It was dark. I circled around to the front door and was met by Sister Madeleine Mary. "Bob isn't going to make it this morning," she said, talking about the priest, "and it's too cold to go to the chapel." The chapel was heated, but poorly insulated, and was separated from the main part of the convent by an unheated walkway. Three of the sisters used walkers or wheelchairs. Rolling slowly through an unheated space was not a good idea. Instead of the chapel, they were setting up the dining room where folks gathered for breakfast each morning after the service.

The Convent is oriented east to west and sits on the edge of the Cumberland Plateau. Below the convent the edge of the plateau drops 800 ft to the bottom of the cove. The south wall of the dining room is all windows and from those windows you can see south to Alabama, while to the west a finger of plateau stretches outward. The cove is forested the whole way down, until in the rich bottomland the trees give way to fields. The view is expansive, impressive in all seasons.

That morning we cleared off one of the long dining room tables, and Sister Lucy sat at the head. Sister Lucy was the first woman ordained in Tennessee. She was born and raised in the little town at the bottom of the mountain, and had been a part of the convent community for more than fifty years. By the time I got to know her, she always used a wheelchair. Her vision had deteriorated to the point that she could barely read the large print prayers the sisters made for her. During the year I had been worshipping with the sisters, her health had rapidly declined.

The service began with silence, moved through the opening words, and into the chanting of the psalms. I looked out the large windows and saw the snow swirling, the valley glittering white, and the wind whipping charges of snow off the pine branches just outside. Each pause at the asterisk felt timeless, as if the snow blurring the valley disrupted each passing moment.

Aided by one of the other sisters, Sister Lucy arranged the elements--first the bread, then the wine. With shaky hands she dripped water into the chalice. She began the Eucharistic prayer--

"The Lord be with,"

"And also with you"

"Lift up your hearts,"

This was only the second time I had seen her celebrate the Eucharist, and the first time I was so close. She wasn't reading the words off the page. They were inside of her, written on her heart through all her years of ministry to that community.

Her voice shaky with age. She faltered over a few lines, places where her memory was losing its grasp. She raised the bread, barely off the plate, and broke it.

"The gifts of God for the people of God."

That was the last time--as far as I know--that Sister Lucy ever celebrated the Eucharist. That cold, snowy, Epiphany morning. She died less than a year later.

In that room, God revealed Godself. God was revealed in each of those women who've committed themselves to life in community, who've devoted themselves to God--a life of prayer and simplicity. They've given up careers, homes, the desire for success as the world defines it, to live on top of a plateau in Tennessee, welcoming wayward travellers, offering a spiritual home to anyone who is seeking.

God revealed Godself in Lucy's shaking hands, hands uncertain of the future, but certain of one thing--God present in that bread and that wine.

God revealed Godself in the unrelenting and swirling snow, transforming the forest I spent years getting to know, blanketing it in silence.

There's no going back to the way things were after that day. I had encountered the living God. With luminous clarity, I experienced God at work in that room. There was no going back the way that I had come in. I was marked by that moment, surer not only of a call to the priesthood, But of the endurance of God's love for God's people, love for the world in all it's mess and beauty. I encountered a love that had taken on flesh, that had revealed itself in human faces, human hands. There was no choice but to go back by another road.

The Sisters had a tradition on Epiphany. In addition to a sermon, each year someone would read a poem--T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." The poem--I believe--captures the central message of Epiphany. The complex relationship of the birth of Jesus and the transformation of those who encounter him--the death of old ways, and the birth of something new.

They asked me to read the poem for them that snowy morning in Epiphany. I'll share it with you now:

Journey of the Magi

By T.S. Eliot

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,

And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.