

Year C, Epiphany, 1/6/13
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Hope Central Church
Matthew 2:1-12

Once when I was in England, visiting my big sister Cindy, I made arrangements to go to the church of St. Julian of Norwich in East Anglia. Julian was a 14th century Christian mystic, who enclosed herself in a cell that adjoined the church building, a discipline by which she lived out her calling, to seek God, to receive the blessed sacrament – delivered by a priest of the church through a window, and to be a spiritual advisor to all who came to that same window.

Julian wrote that God formed words in her understanding, a way of describing God's answers to her prayer and requests for guidance. She also wrote about the sucking at the breast of Jesus the mother, an image I heartily cherished having come from an evangelical world of God the Father, Jesus, the obedient son, and the Holy Spirit that could make you do anything the Father wanted.

In England, I had just broken up with my first partner, and was heartbroken and only starting to heal. I knew a song composed around Julian's words, "All things shall be well, all manner of things shall be well."

During my break up and recovery I chanted these words, sang this song, and I was kept from the emotional cliff by God's hands, and Julian's experience with the divine. I wanted to be one of the ones, who over the centuries have received Julian's spiritual wisdom, and I wanted to thank God for her.

I left my sister's, taking the train from Nottinghamshire to Norwich, preparing my heart to meet God's own Julian, and Julian's Jesus.

I was given overnight shelter in Norwich by a family friend. I got up early the morning of my visit, ate lightly, and then I was delivered to the church. I felt not quite ready, so I sat outside to pray, to be quiet, to get grounded, to prepare my heart to meet Julian and her Jesus.

When I was ready, I got up, I arose, I lifted my chin and walking into the church at Norwich. There I found not the deep silence I had expected, a silence through which I would be transported into deep mystical experience, into the heart of God. But instead, I found a church in the middle of renovation.

"Oh crap," I said. "Oh, sorry," the workers said as they moved ladders around me, up and down they climbed them, slammed their hammers against metal things, cutting lumber with circular saws, verooooommm.

Oh my God, I thought, I came all this way to see Jesus the mother, and I can't even hear my own thoughts. I tried to be zen. I sat on a bench against a wall to try to pray, but I was so self-conscious. I was the only person trying to pray in the church, and I worried that I looked silly sitting there with my pious praying face on, with my trying to have a mystical experience posture, while workers whirled around me. Pretty quickly, I got up

from my seat in the main sanctuary, mortified, to go to Julian's cell. But I was so mortified, embarrassed, yet, sitting there, that I was unable to drop into prayer or silence my mind. And I was disappointed not to feel Julian's presence, or Jesus' or God's.

I was miffed that the experience of God I had planned, was not delivered. I sat a long time, and after a couple of hours, I began to feel not disappointed, but calm, instead. Serene, anyway. Determined to leave with some holy transcendent experience, I decide, I decided to know that God exists, even in the chaos of hammering, and that I am not abandoned even when things turn out not to be the way I planned. I learned I am not owed an experience of God, but that God, is always available and that for me, the presence of God is an inside job. I offered my heart to God, and took home a rock to remember the day and that epiphany.

I imagine the Magi, who were perhaps priests of Zoroastrianism from Persia, not only three Magi probably, but maybe twelve, and maybe a whole caravan of Magi, servants, stewards, and family, making their way west to see a King – their astronomical technology pointing toward the auspicious place of a King's power and realm. On the way, they called in at Jerusalem, to Herod, himself a Roman appointed puppet king, ruler of his own Jewish people. He, non-practicing. They, the people, not only oppressed by the colonizing Roman's laws, taxation, and constant threat of violence, but also by their own who did not have their interests at heart.

By their presence, the Magi tipped off Herod, that there was another contender for the kingship in Israel and its spoils, its protections from the bluntest of the colonizer's tools. Herod asked the Magi for recognition, for intelligence as to the location of the competing king.

The Magi went on their way from Jerusalem, another 5 miles south to Bethlehem. There, they saw, not a palace, not a king's throne in a great hall, no retinue of servants and tables of babulous food, but instead, a carpenter's toddler, their expectations of a royal encounter not realized. What perhaps they found was a hand saw being applied to wood by a cuckolded carpenter father. But here, over the carpenter's toddler, a celestial light had stopped.

This is the epiphany, we know, the revelation of Christ to the world, the one whom the Jew's had been hoping, the Anointed One, the one for whom Isaiah wrote hopefully, this poetry, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of GOD is rising upon you. Though darkness still covers the earth, and dense clouds enshroud the peoples; upon you, God now dawns, and God's glory will be seen among you."

A carpenter's toddler was maybe not who they came all the way from Persia to see, but it was who the King turned out to be. They gave their gifts, they paid obeisance as was done there, by getting on their knees and bowing, then returned home, warned in a dream, by a different way.

There are signs of the Divine everywhere, especially in Matthew's Gospel.

Mary's pregnancy was not accomplished by egg and sperm but by body and Spirit.

Joseph, the cuckolded was told in a dream that child's conception was not a breach of contract, nor perhaps, a cheat of his expectation of Mary's affection.

The Magi were warned by dream, a warning of Herod's impending violence, a slaughter of all male children 2 years old and younger, and went home by another way.

Joseph was warned by an angel of the Lord to escape to Egypt for safety's sake, and then was given the all clear by an angel to return after Herod's death.

At Jesus' baptism, the heavens were opened, the spirit of God descended, and there was a voice from heaven.

Jesus was led by a spirit into the wilderness for initiation, and was ministered to by angels.

Later he will be transfigured, his face shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling white, and more angels and heavenly beings will be present.

There are signs everywhere.

And at his death, an earthquake.

There are signs and dreams all around Jesus, and by those signs, the people were and are called to behold the Divine one. And so, we are called to see Jesus.

We have, some of us, thought that the signs were fixed, or that we must believe in the literality of the signs, the virgin birth, angels inviting shepherds, a star over the manger, angels who warn and direct.

But instead, I believe the signs were recorded so that we know that God is signaling to us, come and see, come and be, come and know, come and taste.

Can you see this shift in orientation, from fact to open willingness to see, to be, to know, and to taste?

Some of us have been to Bethlehem like the Magi, to see where the Human One was born. Some of us were disappointed by the Cathedral, the commerciality, the long lines of pilgrims, doubters, tourists, and money changers. We were ready to criticize, to make fun of, to judge. We wanted to see what we thought we came to see, as if we were owed, and so went home disappointed.

But some of us were ready to see the signs, to hear the voice of God, to see God there in that place where, for a couple of thousand years, people have knelt down in that grotto underneath the altar, to kiss the place where Jesus might have been born. I, determined to see the holy everywhere, opened my heart, knelt and kissed that place, and brought home this stole, so I could remember that God is everywhere, even in a line of tourists.

I wonder for you, what would get you out of your chair and onto your camel or into your prius to follow a star, to go see where God has been. It's not that you need to go, but

that you can.

Maybe for you, it's not a star that you'll follow, but some sign or dream that that lights up you, and causes you to rise, determined to have a transcendent experience, maybe at the water's edge, or at the side of an 3 year old's hospital bed.

Maybe you'll need to travel to Majorca or Loredes, or maybe you'll need to see a sign of God's light in a client's eye, a partner's heart. It's all there, I believe for us to see, to follow, once we stop insisting on what we think we might see, once we stop with our insistence or rejection of fundamentalism, once our eyes have opened. Jesus might be a toddler, or mother or the king of your heart, and our work here is to follow, to bring our gifts, to kneel, not because we're owed an experience, but because it's available to us. We can open our hearts, and take home a rock to remember we saw God in that place.