

When I was a chaplain at Children's Hospital, we were trained to think of ourselves not as bringing God with us to those we ministered, but instead to enter a room as though we were ministering to Christ. When I entered the hospital room, I never knew what to expect. Sometimes, I'd find people in deep sorrow. Other times, I witnessed great joy, but the challenge was to look for God in everyone. Of course, it was easier to see God in some people and more difficult in others, but if I was open and present, I saw wonders that changed me—forever changed me. I couldn't return home the same because I had been changed by my encounters with God. I had to go home by another road. In this little throw away verse at the end of the reading, the wise men leave for their own country by another road. They don't return the same way they came. Their journey has changed them. That's what encountering God does—it changes us, and we have to find a new way home.

In the time of King Herod... this is how the story of Epiphany starts. When Jesus is born, King Herod was at the end of his ruthless life that was filled with both power and paranoia. Sadly, those two phenomena are often intertwined in our political and social leaders. Power doesn't come without struggle, and once one attains it, paranoia at losing power becomes an obsession. Herod didn't start out a king but was born the son of a powerful man named Antipater. Herod was appointed a governor of Galilee in 47 BC by his father, while his brother was appointed governor of Jerusalem. After a series of battles, Herod lost his governorship and went to Rome looking for help. The Roman Senate appointed him the King of the Jews in 40BC. After gaining control of Jerusalem, Herod ruled with an iron fist. Over the course of his reign, he took 10 wives, ordered multiple assassinations to consolidate power, including killing some of his own sons and wives. Now this old evil man, clinging to his throne for as long as he can is met by wise men from the east asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"

I would love to have seen the look on Herod's face when the wise men ask him this. Matthew says he was frightened. Those who are obsessed with power are ruled by fear. Meanwhile, the wise men have a childlike innocence about them. They assume Herod will be as excited to bow before the new king as they are. But Herod wasn't excited. He was afraid. It's sad to think of how many people believe attaining power is what life is all about. That to be a winner is to be in control. Herod is the ultimate example of what giving one's life to power becomes—a paranoid, depressed tyrant, connected to nobody and nothing but power. He was so concerned that when he died, no one would mourn, that he ordered a large group of innocent men to be killed upon his death to ensure that there would be weeping in Jerusalem. Thankfully his wishes were not carried out, which means his fear was realized—no one was sad when he died. Power did not lead Herod to the truth, only to misery.

The wise men tell Herod of a star that led them to Jerusalem. How that works and how a star moves out ahead of them to lead them to the exact place where Jesus is? I don't know. It's best to not try and explain it but simply receive it as part of the story that is meant to teach us. Herod gathers the chief priests and scribes to find out where the Messiah was to be born, pretending to want to come and pay homage to this new king. The scholars dust

off the scroll to Malachi which speaks of Bethlehem as the place from which a new ruler will come. Herod's power doesn't lead him to the truth. Perhaps even more interesting, knowledge of the scriptures didn't lead the chief priests and scribes to the truth either. In fact, by telling Herod about Bethlehem, they end up endangering all the children in Bethlehem.

Power doesn't lead to truth. And knowledge doesn't lead to truth, either. Michel Foucault the postmodern philosopher famously taught that power creates knowledge, and knowledge creates power. In other words, knowledge is not about discovering an objective reality but rather is propaganda used by those in power to preserve what they have. It's a radical claim, and I think that's largely true, but it misses out on what's most important, which is truth. Neither power nor knowledge lead to truth. What does lead us to truth?

Matthew gives us the weirdest answer I could ever imagine. The NRSV calls these people from the east, "wise men" but the Greek word here is magi, which is where we get the word magician. They are not kings, despite everyone's favorite Epiphany song, but astrologers, people who studied the stars to understand the future. And in one of the most unexpected twists in all of scripture, these Biblically ignorant star gazers end up knowing more about God than either the King of the Jews or all the biblical scholars in Jerusalem. The truth is often discovered by unlikely people, and we do well to remember that.

Now the Bible does not speak well of astrology and forbids it in a variety of places, so what is surprising to us would have been downright scandalous to Matthew's early Jewish readers. And yet here it is. Perhaps the people we are used to thinking of as foolish, superstitious, and ignorant know more about God than we do. I wish the history of Christian missions over the past 2000 years could be rewritten with this story in mind. When Christians armed with their power and Bible knowledge have gone to "heathen" people to bring the Gospel, rarely have they gone assuming the people they meet may know more about God than they do. But, oh how I wish we would! Here we are at the birth of the Messiah, God sees fit to reveal salvation to people we historically would call heathen, while God's chosen people miss the boat entirely. If that doesn't humble us, I don't know what will.

Maybe knowing God has far less to do with having the correct doctrine than it does having the correct posture. Herod looks only for threats to his power, so that's what he sees, everywhere. The scholars look for correct information in the scriptures, while missing the very one to whom the scriptures point. Meanwhile those looking at the night sky see something out of place in their normal experience. Instead of dismissing it, they follow it, not based on knowledge but intuition. They move beyond what they understood to trust a wisdom beyond their own, and with childlike innocence they journey into the unknown to find this new thing God is doing. That's what we call faith.

God is still doing new things in our midst. The question is, are we looking for them, or are we busy preserving our power and knowledge? I'd be lying if I didn't say that I like both power and knowledge, because I do. But neither bring us to the truth. Instead, it's

when we recognize that God isn't as interested in preserving our power as we are that we might discover the truth. When we are open to the unlikely people that God brings into our path, when we assume other people know as much or more about God than we do, then perhaps we'll find God where God loves to be found—in the overlooked and the unlikely, on the margins and even in what we despise.

I'm not big on New Year's resolutions, but here's one we as a church might consider: looking for God in the unexpected and the unlikely. Can we do that? In the great irony of the ages, those who witness and understand the birth of Christ are the pagan astrologers, while Israel's king and religious leaders not only miss the truth, they actively work against it. And if that's not the ultimate lesson in looking for God in the unexpected, then I don't know what is. When we are open to discovering God in everything and everyone, then we will know joy and wonder, and we will be changed. The magi went home by another way—forever changed by what they had seen and heard. As we open ourselves to God in unlikely people and places, we too will be changed and find home by another way.