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Searching for Epiphany
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

As a young person I had the horrible luck of getting motion sickness on long car rides

The one perk of getting nauseous in a small enclosed space was that I didn't seem to get as sick if I sat in the front seat – so often on long car rides with my family, my mother and brothers would reluctantly squish into the back seat and I would sit shotgun

This meant, however, that I had an important role: I had to be the navigator

Yes, believe it or not, these were still the days of folded up maps in the car and no GPS systems or cell phones

I remember one trip in Germany in particular when I was about 16 years old where I was sitting in the front seat and acting as navigator for my father who is an extremely cautious driver

My mother, at a rest stop, approached me and complimented me:
“Amanda, you're doing such a great job navigating! Whenever dad asks where we are you always know exactly where we are!”

To which I quickly, and quietly, responded: “oh no I don't! But I know if dad asks me where we are and I tell him “I don't know” he'll pull over on the highway and make a big deal of it.”

I always knew generally where we were or at least what our projected route was, and so when my dad asked where we were I pointed in that general vicinity with confidence and he didn't really look to confirm (he was driving on the Autobahn remember) – that act would satisfy his curiosity, and I knew that this generally gave me 20 minutes to *actually* figure out where we were and what our next move was.

I was a good bluffer, and an okay navigator

There are still times when both Tasha and I prefer to use our Gazetteer to navigate a trip rather than using our phones

And, for all the moving I did in my 20's and early 30's, I always knew I was really making a place my home when I could navigate around the town without my phone – maybe even learning some of the backroads – knowing which general direction I needed to head and using the sun in the sky to know if I was heading North, South, East, or West

The feeling of knowing where you are and where you're headed with confidence is one of great satisfaction and contentment, and conversely, the feeling of being lost can be one of the most unsettling

Today we celebrate The Epiphany of the Lord, Three Kings Day – the day when we acknowledge that a group of Magi followed a star to the place where the new king was born and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh

A day rich in meaning and tradition, in fact, in some places Epiphany was the greater celebration for centuries over Christmas – and in some places it still is

Bruce Epperly, a retired UCC minister and Process Theologian, holds the significance of this holiday as “Magi from the East, from another religious tradition, follow a star and discover what the spiritual and political leadership [of the day] miss – the presence of God in unexpected places.”¹

Isn't it wonderful that it's a group of outsiders who are used to looking for signs and signals of divine engagement in ways we're not used to who are able to notice this very important sign, signaling the birth of a very

¹ <https://processandfaith.org/lectionary-commentary/the-epiphany-of-the-lord-january-6-2024/>

important person, and who then follow that sign and meet the young child, Jesus, with his parents and offer him gifts fit for a king

It is *this* story of these outsiders' journey to find Jesus that gives our claim that Jesus was indeed Emmanuel, "God with us," the Christ, the most street cred we could ask for, and why this holiday is so important in the Christian calendar

But more than street cred, the Magi and their ability to notice what we don't notice gives us permission to, well, notice what we don't notice to find God with us

"We cannot assume...that God will come in our anticipated ways and places," Dr. Epperly writes. "God speaks uniquely and universally, and cannot be hemmed in by our doctrines, institutions, and liturgies."

Certainly those latter things – doctrines, institutions, and liturgies – have striven for centuries to give people a path towards that encounter with God, a map you might say

Pulling from scripture and indigenous practices of communities all over the world, the Christian faith has become an amalgam of expressions of words, songs, prayers, and practices that attempt to give your mind, your body, and your spirit a path towards encountering the greatest love the world has known

And, as Dr. Epperly expresses, God's expressions of love and grace are not restricted to only those places and perhaps we need to look for another symbol and signal that God is near

A star? Maybe – a burning bush? that'd be nice

But, Dr. Epperly reminds us that "Reality is revelatory of holiness and wholeness for all who have eyes to see or senses toprehend."

“Epiphany celebrates revelation in all things, and in and through all people. In holy otherness, in unexpected people, places, and nations, holiness can be found” he says. “No one is excluded from divine revelation.”

Wow.

It may not be gold, frankincense, or myrrh, but this invitation to perceive God in the reality of the world around me may be an even greater gift than those kingly offerings

January marks the anniversary of my call here at St. Bart’s, for two years we’ve shared the journey of being faithful disciples in this context

For two years we’ve attempted to navigate a “post-COVID reality” – as much as there is such a thing, speaking from recent experience – and we’ve tried to figure out what it means to be a faith community in this post-COVID world, just as the whole world is trying to figure out how to be community together post-COVID

We are searching and longing for that connection – for ways to pull us back towards each other after feeling so pushed away from each other

And, if we’re honest, some of this sense of falling apart started even before the pandemic, at least in the church

Large swaths of people who seemed to be on a sure path of faithful exploration and discipleship have strayed from the church – the doctrines, the institutions, and liturgies

Many churches and denominations are grieving the lack of people in the pews, or seats, especially children and young people

“They are lost” we claim

Yet every research poll I read says that these folks, though they no longer affiliate with a specific denomination, still believe in God, still pray, still long for a sense of connection to that which exists outside of themselves

Often described as “spiritual but not religious” I’ve met just as many people in churches who are “religious but not spiritual”

Whether we find ourselves in the pews or in coffee shops, I think there is still a deep longing amongst those of us with any semblance of faith for an even greater sense of connection to Emmanuel, “God with us”

And, perhaps all of us could take a note from the wise Magi and try to perceive what the political and religious leaders of today miss, the star in the sky – the sign and signal that God is indeed near

I’m the kind of person who likes a map, most of the time, and so I’m one who will likely still hold on to the doctrines, and institutions, and liturgies because they do offer me something in this journey

And, there is a part of me that is ready to use landmarks and the sun to find my path – to let reality be revelatory

It doesn’t have to be “either, or” it can be “both, and”

Because as Debie Thomas notes, “Looking. Seeing. Finding. These are the things we are called to do, not once, but over and over again as Christians. This is the heart of discipleship – not to hasten the end of our search, but to pursue it ever more deeply and intentionally. To cultivate a willingness to look. A willingness to see and be seen. A willingness to tell the truth about what we have found. A willingness to venture forth again, even when we don’t know where” we will land.²

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2503-what-are-you-looking-for>

Trusting always that we will find Emmanuel, “God with us,” in those unexpected places.

May it be so, Amen.