

Epiphany (transferred). January 8, 2017. Matt. 2:1-12.

At the heart of this story is an encounter with God, which in itself isn't always spectacular. I am convinced that when I am paying attention, I encounter God all the time: in the people who come here for help, around hospital beds, among you when some ministry you're doing brings you fully to life and your soul lights up. This is what it is to have an incarnational faith: you are convinced that God encounters you in this world that God hallowed through Jesus' life. But the encounter with God at the heart of this story is a bit spectacular. It features four different kings, a fantastic journey, a magical star, and Jesus himself in the flesh. We, I have to admit, are kind of unlikely to be main characters in a story exactly like that.

But another aspect of having an incarnational faith, a faith that God became enfleshed in Jesus, is a conviction that the spectacular is continuous with the mundane. In other words, we believe that even if this particular array of miraculous events never occurs in history again, God's activity is consistent and this sequence can teach us about the normal, less unbelievably miraculous ways we are likely to encounter God.

So here are a few wise lessons we can take from these wise men on encountering God. First, it isn't always easy. These folks undertake a long and dangerous journey, leaving their kingdoms in an era when the absence of the king always threatens revolution. They put themselves at risk on roads without a highway patrol. And, in less action-movie terms, they endure the brutal boredom of a long trip, on horse or camel, through lands where they don't know anyone and they don't speak the language.

But, they aren't clueless—they're following the star. They have a guide that is leading them reliably toward where they will encounter God. I guess they were discerning astronomers, but even with all of their skill and the roadside star pointing the way, they still got lost. They made the all-too-human assumption that the king of the Jews would be born at the palace, so they went to see Herod. There are a few things here: they had reliable guidance; because of their assumptions they got lost anyway; and they discovered that God is much more easily encountered among the lowly than among the most powerful. And finally, after they meet the Christ-child, they go home by another road. I think we can take this to mean, symbolically, that they go away changed by their encounter with God.

Now I think that this gives us a pattern for what to expect in terms of encountering God—not that it will always be exactly like this, but like the magi's star, this pattern is a reliable guide, because our living God is the same one these three kings met in Bethlehem. So first, sometimes encounters with God are hard, dangerous, or boring. I mentioned earlier that I believe that I encounter God in the people who come here for help—but this is a particularly arduous and frustrating way to see an epiphany, as it often involves similar problems, with similar obstacles to getting the help that is available. This is a reliable way to encounter God, but there are others—we have encounters with God available to us, but in many different ways they may require work: even if it's just the work of finding time for silence.

Second, just as the magi had the star to guide them to God, we have trustworthy indicators of how to find God. The trick is just keeping our eye on them, or paying attention—and paying attention is essentially prayer. We know that we can encounter God in others, in prayer, in the liturgy and eucharist; hopefully each of us has spiritual practices that reliably bring us to the place where God will meet us, whether it's gardening or cooking or keeping the Daily Office or going for walks.

But third, we're almost guaranteed to make mistakes—to let our assumptions and biases take us the wrong way, just as the magi assumed that God's salvation would be found at the palace. I don't think these mistakes are likely to be fully eliminated in our lives, but we can watch for them and recover from them. And one way to avoid this exact mistake is to remember that God has a special care for the lowly. And though following God there may sometimes take us out of our comfort zones, that is one of the surest places to encounter God. And if we do all this and have the good sense to realize when we are in God's presence, we can be sure that the road we leave by will be different from the one we came in on. We will be changed.

Whether our encounters with God come easily or hard, whether our clue-following is faithful or desultory, whether we are among the powerful or the lowly, the most important thing is that we come to them willing to be changed. And if we are willing to be changed by God, then there is a very good chance that wherever we are, God will come to us.