

Eureka v. Epiphany
January 5, 2020
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It's curious, and maybe telling, the way the meanings of words change and sometimes seem to come completely unmoored over time. What do you think an epiphany is?

You wouldn't be wrong, according to Merriam Webster, to think it is close kin to "eureka". Remember the story of that word's invention? The great Archimedes is sitting in his bath at Syracuse, contemplating a riddle. He was asked by the local tyrant Hiero to determine whether the ruler's crown was pure gold or not. As the legend goes, Archimedes sinks into his tub, and as the water rises, he realizes that since gold is heavier than lesser metals, a crown of the same weight containing silver would have to be bulkier and would therefore displace more water. The insight thrilled the great polymath so much that he leapt from the bath and ran naked through the town shouting, "Eureka!" Which means, "I've found it!" in Greek.

An epiphany is a flash of insight, right? A eureka from the mind of Archimedes. An instant in which something once befuddling or insolvable becomes clear. But the shape of the Epiphany story in the Bible is not much like this one at all.

It's true that we tend to collapse the time frame and exaggerate the star in our Christmas imaginations. We have magi showing up at the manger and the star—on our greeting cards, at least—is the astronomical equivalent of one of those giant flashing arrow signs: "Savior of the world! Turn here!" But the story we have is of a much slower and much dimmer revelation, even if it takes only a few verses in Matthew's telling. It's a story of wise men from someplace off in the East. Astrologers. Readers of the stars. Zoroastrians, some people think, who had seen an appearance in the constellations that indicated the birth of a king. So they set out.

T.S. Eliot evoked it well, even if was guessing at the season. "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." This was no flash of revelation. It was a slow unfolding of a trip set out upon in faith.

"Epiphany" means "manifestation." It means something or someone has been made known. And in this case it's the Christ child who is made known to the gentiles. To nations beyond the borders of Israel. But these particular gentiles didn't get knocked from their camels with a revelation like St. Paul's on the road to Damascus. They saw some strange, obscure sign in the heavens that, as far as we know, no one else in the whole world noticed. And these foreigners set out for Jerusalem with gifts to pay homage to another country's new king.

So, this epiphany is slowed down by the distance these strangers to the story must travel. Slowed by the preparations they must make. By the stubbornness of their camels, perhaps. Slowed by the weather and all the familiar limitations we face as human beings in a material world. And in addition to all that, they were slowed by politics. There were borders to be crossed between their world and Judea. And while the TSA hadn't been invented quite yet to slow them down, they were probably following some custom or protocol or political good sense when they checked in with a kind of local king named Herod.

Now part of my purpose in drawing out the journey of these magi a bit is to remind us that Herod was much closer in to this story than our travelers. In fact, even if he was a pawn of the emperor, Herod Antipas was raised a Jew, and may well have been a practicing one.

Matthew makes no bones about Herod being a very bad guy, but he's also much more one of us, if we place ourselves in Matthew's world, than the magi. Which makes his badness, and the magi's patient faithfulness, all the more interesting. All the more subversive even. Because after the wise men are warned in a dream to return to their country by another way, do you remember how the story plays out? Joseph is warned in a dream to take a journey with his family down to Egypt because Herod is about to come unhinged and kill all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two.

Now, of all the gospels, Matthew is the one most careful to make connections between the story of Jesus and older stories of the Hebrew people. He can actually be kind of annoying. He's constantly interrupting a perfectly good narrative with little explanations that often begin, "This was to fulfill what that old prophet once said..." He must have been a terrible joke teller.

But Matthew also makes references to Hebrew history that he doesn't spell out for us. Anybody remember another slaughter of innocent children back in the Old Testament? But a lot gets turned around from the old story that began with baby Moses in the bullrushes. Back in Exodus, the Israelites had migrated to Egypt in a time of famine, and when a king arose in Egypt who didn't know the lovely story of Joseph and his technicolor dream coat, he forced these immigrants into labor camps. But the more he oppressed them, the more numerous and powerful they grew. So he ordered that all the Hebrew baby boys be killed. But Pharaoh's daughter found Moses floating in a basket among the reeds and took him in.

To Matthew's credit, he doesn't say, "This murdering of children thing was meant to show that Jesus is the new Moses." He lets us make the connection. But the story does more than make Jesus a type of Moses. Look how it disrupts assumptions about who counts as insiders and outsiders. In Moses's time, the paranoid tyrant is an Egyptian, and the Hebrews are the foreigners. Migrants have been treated horribly since time immemorial, it seems. Moses will be the prophet who will lead them out of Egypt to freedom. But Jesus's parents flee *to* Egypt, an archetypal place of persecution in the Hebrew story. They flee to Egypt to get away from a Jewish king in Judea, their home. And the Epiphany, the manifestation of God, happens to people who are not Hebrews. They are foreigners of a strange religion whose presence disrupts the old story of Moses further, even as it echoes it.

In fact, disruption may be the most consistent element across these stories. It seems disruption of our categories and identities has always been an essential element of epiphanies in the Bible.

Epiphanies are not sudden flashes of insight or sudden sightings of God. Epiphanies are long journeys away from the places where we've come to be at home. Epiphanies happen among migrants and foreigners, or among people who are no longer at home in their own country, not among the those who are settled and in charge. In fact, the ones most settled and most in charge in scripture are almost always the ones who get anxious about preserving their settlements and their power and get violent. Which is why the cross will be the deepest disruption to the order of things of all. Such are the ways of God in the world, according to our sacred stories. Epiphanies are not personal, interior, private experiences. They almost always involve strangers, migrants, tyrants. The messy stuff of politics and history.

And, so, if we create borders to our lives that we think define where God is at work, what kinds of people God uses and loves, it seems God will use the borders we construct almost exclusively as places of crossing and encounter. Wherever we happen to be, God will almost always come to us from the other side, or send us off on a journey to the other side. Borders in the Bible are made for crossing. Because that's where the transformation seems to happen.

And if you, like I do, still long for a deeper transformation within yourself. If you still long for the healing of your spirit, long for a manifestation of God in your life... Well, this may still be our story. It just means that our private epiphanies aren't meant to stay that way and maybe that the healing we need happens in the places where our epiphanies send us, among the people we encounter there.

Some days God may well want you to go draw yourself a hot bath and wait on a revelation. But remember, even dear old Archimedes ended up running through the streets of the town, very much exposed, if you will, to the strangers he was yelling his mad "Eureka!" to. They, and he, and the king, and all sorts of folk were surely changed in his private epiphany's wake.

Toni Morrison once wrote, "There are no strangers. There are only versions of ourselves, many of which we have not embraced, most of which we wish to protect ourselves from. For the stranger is not foreign, she is random; not alien but remembered; and it is the randomness of the encounter with our already known—though unacknowledged—selves that summons a ripple of alarm."

Perhaps, in the end, the Bible keeps sending strangers across our borders because our fear of the other not only damages the strangers whom we fear and the world God wants us to help restore, but it also keeps a fear of the stranger parts of ourselves alive as well, and keeps those hurting, lonely, estranged parts of our souls hunkered down and walled off from the epiphany...the manifestation of God in our lives...waiting to take place even in us. Even today.