

Isaiah 60:1-6
Ephesians 3:1-12
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Matthew 2:1-12

The Feast of the Epiphany A
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Home

When people ask me to tell them the best thing that happened on my sabbatical, I don't know what to say. There were so many amazing, surprising, even miraculous things that happened in those months away from home. The gifts are still being revealed. I know myself so much better. I know our congregation better. I know God better. And I really did learn that God is present in everyone, in every place, in everything I encounter. I also learned that when I don't pay attention, the wonder of God with us, God in us, God in all things... disappears. It's not that God disappears, we do.

But what happened?" people ask, or "what was the best thing you saw?" or "what was your favorite?" And the truth is, I do have a favorite, but it's a story so precious and so important that I haven't really been able to share it, and I'm not sure how well I'll do sharing it now. But I will try. It's a story about coming home, and it is one of the greatest gifts I've been given.

Some of you know that I grew up in Hawai'i and that I fell in love with God as much because of Hawaiian myth and spirituality as because of Jesus who loved all the little children of the world. For my sabbatical, I wanted to return to Hawai'i to study Hawaiian spirituality, especially as expressed in hula. My mom, my sister and I danced for many years in Hawai'i, and I wanted to dance again, to feel the stories and to dance them.

Hawai'i was the last two months of my sabbatical. My sabbatical began with an 8-day silent retreat at a monastery in the hills of Big Sur. Mostly silent. One day, I encountered a woman, Mary Grace, on the trail and we had a conversation. "Where do you live?" she asked. "I live on an island in Puget Sound, near Seattle." "Oh! I live on an island too. I live on Hawai'i island in the town of Volcano." I told her that most of my sabbatical would be on the big island of Hawai'i and that I was going there to study Hawaiian spirituality and hula. She danced with a Kumu – a master teacher. If I wanted to visit, she would ask her Kumu if I could join their class.

It turned out that Mary Grace was in Colorado when I was to visit the town of Volcano, but I went anyway and stayed in the middle of a wonderfully drippy, jungley rainforest. They offered private hula lessons there, which seemed like a dream come true. When my teacher came in, I was immediately drawn to her and only wanted to sit at her feet. She was one of the most stunningly beautiful women I have ever seen – she seemed to smile from the inside out. Her proud Hawaiian heritage and her deep humility were equally palpable. I told her a bit about what I was trying to learn, she thought for a few moments and then she began to tell me the story of a beautiful little girl named La'iekawai, whose father was tired of daughters. A guardian whisked

About leaving her away and brought her to a rainforest where she couldn't be found. "It is somewhere very close to here," she said, "so I will dance it for you."

It was so beautiful I could hardly bear it and when she finished, I burst into tears. Then she began to cry too. So we sat on the floor together for a very long time as she taught me the truth of herself and of hula. She wasn't to have been my teacher, she was there because the regular teacher was ill. It turns out she was Mary Grace's kumu, and the master teacher, the source of hula for the Volcano area. I cannot explain how Kumu Meleana entered my heart that day, how I entered hers, how deeply we connected or how I found a home in her and she in me. But we did.

Home... what makes a home? How do we know we are home? Is home a place? A feeling? A sensibility? While you might not realize it, this story of the Magi following that bright star in the night sky is really a story about home. , about finding home, about homing instincts. Three Magi left their home to follow a bright star into a world they never, ever could have imagined. They weren't kings, they were Magi, likely people of a priestly class from Persia or Babylon, probably experts in the occult and the interpretation of dreams. We would know them more as magicians, sorcerers, astrologers and stargazers. So that bright star in the east that seemed to just settle in one place, was probably of more interest to them than it would have been to the average person. And still, one wonders how such a star could have compelled only three people to seek it out.

I have to believe many people saw that star. The Magi knew it was the star that belonged to the new king of the Jews, so it had to have been evident to more than three professional stargazers. Stunning stars and comets were thought to herald new kings in ancient times – they were signs of the Heavens crowning a new ruler. There were magnificent comets at the births of Augustus, Caesar and Nero that lots of people recognized. So why wasn't anybody else paying attention to this amazing star, "His star?" "We have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage" the wise ones said. They couldn't have been the only ones who knew.

Why didn't other people pay attention? Were they simply uninterested in this dazzlingly bright star? Or did they see the star and look away, not wanting to be disturbed by something so strange, not wanting to wonder about what such a thing might mean for them, not wanting to be called away from their perfectly, or at least relatively comfortable homes?

It's hard to leave home. I know that very well. But the Magi did leave home, and likely traveled hundreds of miles to Jerusalem. The star had captured their attention – they had set their sights and their minds and their course by it ... that star was their homing device, drawing them to a new home in Christ Jesus. They made their way by that star, but it wasn't the star they were after, it was the newborn king of the Jews. These wise ones weren't Jews, but even so, the star beckoned them too. This new king would be the king of the wise ones too.

Those wise ones must have thought the new king would be born in a palace, which would of course have been in Jerusalem. But when they went to the palace, they didn't find a new king.

They found an old king. And so they asked the old king Herod - where the new king was to be found. As you might imagine, this did not go over well. It doesn't really make sense that they stopped to ask... there was a star to follow, right? But if they hadn't stopped, the story would have gone an entirely different way, and because God and people work in mysterious ways the fact that those seekers stopped to ask old King Herod where they'd find the new king probably shouldn't surprise us. Of course, Herod was enraged. And so he began to plot a way to eliminate any threat of a new king. Herod even figured out a way to use those wise men to help him find the new king, so he could kill him.

The Magi, those wise ones who followed the star had many things to teach us. They listened to what called to them, and not only did they listen, they followed. When they came upon the evil one, they listened to him too, but they did not follow. Having heard the prophecies, they returned their gaze to the star and made their way to Bethlehem. The star was their homing device, bringing them to the newborn king who was not just the king of the Jews. He was their king too, and they knew that the moment they saw him and they bowed down and worshipped him. That's one of the beauties of Epiphany. It's not just that Jesus Christ is the light bright enough to light up the whole wide world, but that Jesus Christ has, from the beginning, belonged to everybody. So having found their newborn king, having worshipped him and offered their gifts, they took their leave. And having been warned in a dream, they went home by another way.

Home by another way. That's such an important part of what the Epiphany story can teach us. We think we know where home is, think we know how to get there until we're stunned into the recognition that the place or the person or the job or the body we've always called home, isn't so reliable. We think we know our true north until he leaves, or she dies or the great silence in the house tells us we are in a house, not a home. Sometimes, we need the big journey, the bright star, the Kumu Hula... the thing we never could have asked for or even imagined in order to get us to look, to really look at what we think we can count on, what we think is the truth, what we think is our home. Home isn't a place. It's not a building or a nest. God is our home.

Sometimes we have to go away from what we think is home to find our true home in God. Sometimes we have to go away from what is familiar and comfortable to remember that God dwells in us and that the light God brought to the world when Jesus was born, is the same light that shines in you and in me and in everyone else too. That light is our homing device and it's a gift we've been given so that we can help other people find their way home too. Before Kumu Meleana even spoke, I knew I had come home, that's how bright her light shines.

It's Epiphany, the time that reminds us to rise and shine, and be the light that can draw people home by another way. Amen.