

January 4

It is not over, this birthing. There are always newer skies into which God can throw stars. When we begin to think that we can predict the Advent of God, that we can box the Christ in a stable in Bethlehem, that's just the time that God will be born in a place we can't imagine and won't believe. Those who wait for God watch with their hearts and not their eyes, listening, always listening for angel words. Ann Weems "Kneeling in Bethlehem"

For many, this first full week of 2021 can feel like a return to our regularly scheduled programming, to the routines and rhythms of life, to normal (whatever that will mean in 2021). Kids go back to school; parents face a full week of work; we start to think about taking down the decorations; some of the hustle and bustle of the past few weeks fades away opening up each day. Yet, before we step out of the straw of the stable and turn toward living in this New Year, there are a few truths to take with us.

First, no matter how much we want to leave 2020 in the dust, the lessons and losses will continue to linger not just this first month of 2021, but for years to come. Just because we put up a new calendar doesn't mean the old year is finished. I think of the Israelites in the book of Exodus when wandering in the wilderness, having secured their freedom from Egypt, then long to go back. You can take the person out of Egypt, but it will take time for Egypt to be taken out of the person. Or you can be done with 2020, but it takes a while until 2020 is done with us. We need to continue to have spaces and places for us to live the questions that linger from last year.

Second, from a church perspective, Christmas isn't finished. Leave that tree up, continue to blast and blare carols, and hold the nativity close because this Wednesday is Epiphany. This is the day when the Christian tradition says the Wise Ones arrived. (By the way, this story is in Matthew 2:1-12 – I encourage you to read the story today letting it sing to your soul. As you do noticed that Matthew doesn't say there are three Wise Ones – but more on that later this week).

As Ann Weems says, "It isn't over". God's birthing new life and new possibilities and promises continues moment-by-moment; day-by-day. Read Matthew today listening for the angel's words to sing to your soul and enliven your heart in this Monday morning.

Prayer: God of this first full week of a New Year, continued to ground me and guide me with the promises of Christmas as with the Wise Ones I continue to search for Your star of wonder, star of light that can lead me on to Your perfect light.

January 5

Today is a day betwixt and between. We know that Christmas isn't over – Epiphany is tomorrow, which means this is Epiphany Eve. And while there is no special service planned, we can faithfully engage and encounter this day. You can re-read Matthew 2:1-12. So often with Scripture we think of passages as one and done. But to keep coming back to the stories letting them speak and sing to our stories is a wonderful prayer practice. Second, you can take time holding each of the Wise Ones from your nativity scene in the palm of your hand. The

Wise Ones traveled a great distance, like us who have traveled emotionally and spiritually a long way in 2020. The Wise Ones took a wrong turn. Yup, I relate to that a lot! The Wise Ones go to the traditional place of power – the palace of King Herod. How often do I get caught up in going to the same places and spaces expecting to encounter something new? We live the truth of Einstein that it can be insanity to do the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Eventually, the Wise Ones get back on track, find Jesus in his home with Mary (I guess Joseph had gone back to work?), and give him gifts. My favorite Epiphany joke is that if there had been Wise Women rather than Men, they would have brought a casserole and diapers and offered to help Mary out. But, the Wise Men bring gold, frankincense and myrrh. I hold the Bible close to my ear and hear Mary saying, “So glad you have all stopped by unannounced and unexpected. And I was just saying to Joseph to pick up some more myrrh on the way home today.” Seriously, this is a funny scene in many ways.

Epiphany means 'revelation' or 'divine appearance'. In these early January days, we continue to stay open. The watching and waiting of Advent wasn't only for Christmas Eve. We engage in that prayer practice in the dwindling of one year to carry the openness with us into a New Year. As Ann Weems said yesterday, “It (hear meaning God's movement in our midst) isn't over”.

How is God moving in your heart and home and whole life today?

What is stirring and swirling within you?

As you look at way lay before you today, how can you keep open to those you encounter and the experiences that fill these hours searching like the Wise Ones for the holy?

May you and I on this Epiphany Eve continue to find our way toward the One who is with us and for us always. Amen.

January 6

Happy Epiphany or is it Merry Epiphany? I always get so confused on the proper way to wish you a holy and magically mysterious Epiphany. I pray you have read Matthew 2:1-12. I pray you have held in your hands the three Wise Ones. I pray you are finding ways to stay open to God's grace guiding and love leading you in these early days of 2021.

Even though Matthew doesn't specify, we have said that there are three Wise Men. We assumed three because there are three gifts mentioned and it would not be wise to show up uninvited at a home without a hostess gift, right? (I am joking here). The church even went so far as to give them names of Melchior; Caspar and Balthazar. Good old Balthazar always the one with a quick joke and Melchior could sing like a angel and Caspar was such a friendly ghost. Just to be clear, that last sentence was a joke – although it is always less funny when you have to explain it.

If you Google their names you might discover, “Melchior was the name of a Persian scholar; Caspar was said to have been from India; and Balthazar was the name a Babylonian scholar.

There is a variation on the name Casper, Gasper, which is found in the book, The Acts of Thomas (as in the dude in the Bible who doubted). The earliest we find these names are in a Greek manuscript probably composed in Alexandria around 500, and which has been translated into Latin. Just so you know, Syrian Christians name the Magi: Larvandang, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas

Our imaginations have filled in the gaps between the small words of print in your scriptures. Our imaginations have written in the margins of our Bibles. This is good. What is difficult, even damaging, is when what we as humans have created becomes written in stone traditions that can never be challenged or changed. Rather, I pray we would continue to let scripture awaken our imaginations and for us to write our own words in the spaces between and the margins of our Bibles.

For me, I find the visit of the Wise Ones fascinating because people came from afar to worship Jesus and perhaps those who lived next-door didn't even notice. How often do I miss the holy hovering, humming, knocking on the door of my heart looking for room? I find it fascinating that the powers-that-be, Herod, is threatened by a baby? Really? Yet, those in power are often afraid of losing power and will do anything to cling tightly to it. That truth is as current as the headlines you read this morning. I find it fascinating that the Wise Ones return home by another way. This year, I long for new roads and new ways of being. But like the Wise Ones those might not just appear. We, you and I, make the road by walking. Step-by-step. Day-by-day. At the same time, the road has always been there. It was paved by someone before us, who we may never know.

On this Epiphany, I ask you to prayerfully ponder the roads you are traveling. I ask for you to stay open to God's revealing presence here and now. I pray for you to find a star, a promise and possibility, that will lead you this day and this year. One prayer tradition on Epiphany is to take a star, write one word on it. Here is a list to get your imagination going:

Kindness	Compassion	Love
Openness	Understanding	Laughter
Discipleship	Service	Depth
Prayerfulness	Playfulness	Praise
Gentleness	Acceptance	Imagination
Friendship	Contentment	Creativity
Courage	Confidence	Clarity
Strength	Thoughtfulness	Patience
Forgiveness	Tenderness	Enthusiasm
Sharing	Healing	Rejoicing
Justice	Mercy	Humility
Wisdom	Wholeness	Wonder
Curiosity	Graciousness	Flexibility
Generosity	Steadfastness	Serenity
Humor	Vision	Thankfulness

There are 45 words above. If you add seven of your own, there would be one for each week this year. Play with these words. See which ones sing to your heart and which ones cause you to think, “Meh...not so much.” Why? Why do you have the response, reaction you do to these words? Words create worlds and have meaning within us. Hold these words. You may want to write them on stars or a piece of paper or on a Sunday for each week this year. Let the language of faith guide you and ground you and stir/speak/sing within you this day. Happy and Merry Epiphany.

January 7

Today, I want to invite you to lean in and listen to the traditional Carol, “We Three Kings.” Listen several times to the lyrics. Maybe see if any of the words you came up with yesterday are singing and stirring in your heart. I love how each of the verses teach and tell us about the three gifts that are brought.

In looking at the three gifts that I brought it is important to note that, “All three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king. Myrrh being commonly used as an anointing oil, frankincense as a perfume, and gold as a valuable. The three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of authority on earth, frankincense (an incense) as a symbol of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of death. Sometimes this is described more generally as gold symbolizing virtue, frankincense symbolizing prayer, and myrrh symbolizing suffering.”

How do these words speak and sing to you? Listen. Continue to let the truth of this holy time of year sing to your heart and soul. May God’s love enfold and hold you now more than ever.

January 8

As we wrap up and wind down the first full week of 2021, how is it going? It is good to build in moments to pause, spaces and places where we can breathe. Reflecting on the good, the bad, and the ugly isn’t just something for the last week of every year, it is a prayer practice for each week of every year.

So what was good this week? When did you laugh so hard your side ached?

What was bad this week? When did your heart break or soul ache?

What was just plain ugly causing you to fume with frustration?

Noticing and naming the roads we have traveled is a great way to wind down and wrap up each week. Keeping these in a journal can also be helpful, especially when we get to December 31, 2021. So, I invite you in some way to look back on these days so far, look around at this present moment, and look forward toward what is waiting and unfolding and unfinished. As you do so, may there be more than a trace of God’s grace and love in your life. Amen.