

**“En Route”****Matthew 2.1–12****The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 3 Jan 2010**

Have you ever felt like you were in the dark? Sometimes, we know that we are aware that we are unaware, and at other times we don’t know that we don’t know.

You know the famous parable of three blind people, each feeling a different part of an elephant: the person with his hands on the trunk thinks that he is feeling snake; the person feeling the elephant’s leg is quite sure that he has his hands on a tree; and the person with his hands on the tail of the elephant is convinced that he has hold of a rope. Our ability to perceive – and our perceptions – differ.

In some ways, we are, all of us, blind to the realities of the universe. “We see through a glass darkly,” writes Paul. We are not privy to many of the mysteries – the realities – around us. We think we see things as they are because we can see them, touch them, smell them, taste them. And science goes a step further by theorizing about and measuring them. But what of things we cannot see, touch, or measure? Are they not real simply because they do not register with us in the usual, recognizable ways? Don’t get me wrong: I’m a big fan of logic and reason, but there is more to life than that.

This may seem a little esoteric, but are things green simply because light gets bent a certain way, and our eyes see that one segment of the spectrum as green? Maybe lime green looks a bit more vivid to you than it does to me; how could I know since I cannot see through your eyes? Perhaps some of us are able to see things that others cannot.

I’ll bet that if you were an upstanding member...or even just an average Joe...in Judea, you would think a group of foreigners who were “seers” were perhaps seeing too much wine rather than seeing authentic visions. But somehow these magi were able to pick up on the subtle mysteries of the stars while other people went on with their daily lives. What happened to this small band of magi was an epiphany...a showing...something was revealed to them that other people simply didn’t see or understand.



What part of your faith would you need to be activated in order to convince you to leave this country and travel for more than a month in search of something that you thought was there, but other people didn’t see? Try to imagine yourself in the place of one of those magi, having an “Aha!” moment that something momentous was going to happen and that you need to be part of it. Can you imagine yourself traveling across a desert into a foreign land to see an infant?

I think sometimes we are privy to things that not everybody else sees. Sometimes we sense that there are forces beyond us that influence the universe, and if we let them, influence our lives. Psychologists like Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describe this phenomenon as flow:<sup>1</sup> when you know something is right and then you do it well with seemingly little effort. You get in the groove when you’re skiing, and you’re not thinking about what you’re doing, you just do it. (I’ve never had that experience skiing, by the way.) Have you ever just known in your gut that something is right, without too much regard for an analysis of the situation? Maybe not, and that’s okay, because there are different ways of knowing and seeing and understanding. The marvelous thing about our faith tradition is that it honors reason, gut feeling, paying attention to dreams, and even seeing visions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*. (NY: Harper, 1991)

I think it's important when to discern whether something is a real epiphany – the movement of the Holy Spirit – or whether it's our superego talking to us. One of the first questions I ask is whether my vision is congruent with the life and teachings of Jesus, and if I can answer “yes,” then at least I'm on my way toward further discernment. I don't think it's enough just to say, “I had a dream that Plymouth should open a 24-hour fitness center in the Fellowship Hall.” I have to provide some rationale. And I have to listen to those around me as well. You'll notice that there are several magi, not just one. If other people around you are also engaged in discernment, then it's important to listen to them as well. That is essential to our United Church of Christ ecclesiology...our theology of being the church together.



Shifting the focus a bit, I think we have gotten away from the idea of pilgrimage in our tradition, and I think we could recapture it with positive effects. In the Middle Ages, as Chaucer has told us, English pilgrims went on pilgrimage to Canterbury, but the greatest pilgrimage a European with some means could make was to visit the Holy Land. Often times, those who visited would return with palm leaves as souvenirs and gifts. Those people were called Palmers, and of course Palmer became a family name for those who had made the enormous trek to the Holy Land (and also those who were very proficient in golf but didn't have a string of extramarital affairs).

A pilgrimage involves intention: having a reason to go and a mindset of devotion as the journey progresses. And for those in the Middle Ages in France who could not go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, they could walk the Labyrinth in the Cathedral in Chartres, a meditation tool that captured a pilgrimage in miniature. The trip to the center and the return home, all done with an attitude of intention and meditation.

Other traditions, of course, have not lost the concept of pilgrimage. Islam has the Hajj, the journey to Mecca. Every Muslim who can afford to do so must make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during their life.

What would happen if we UCC types were to start going on pilgrimages again? I think sometimes our “mission trips” are in fact what the Plowshares Institute calls them: “pilgrimages of reverse mission,” because we may start off thinking that we are going to do some wonderful thing for a group of people. And in the end we discover that we are the primary beneficiaries of the journey, learning more from those we visit than we leave them with.

I think there are other pilgrimages we can make as well. And if they are undertaken with the intention of being a spiritual journey, we never know quite how we will be changed. I think often of my pilgrimage to Ireland with Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan. It was a fabulous two-week journey which I approached not just as an opportunity to be part of the Guinness quality-control team, but as a time of learning about my faith, and with the expectation that there will be moments of epiphany along the way. I remember Dom posing the question to the group: “What is the difference between a pilgrimage and a tour with prayer?” And his answer was that pilgrimage leads one to expect an epiphany of some sort during the travels...that we expect to be changed.

Sometimes, we start off on a journey of faith not knowing what it is we are seeking...perhaps we just know that something is missing. I wonder if those magi knew what they were going to find at the end of their pilgrimage. Matthew's story tells that they were out to find the newborn king of the Jews, and so they paid a visit to Herod to find him, and it is Herod's consulting chief priests and scribes who come up with the idea of

looking in Bethlehem. When the magi started their pilgrimage, they didn't think it would wind up in a stable, but they were able to adapt their expectations along the way.

I wonder whether people who leave their homeland in search of economic opportunity are on a pilgrimage, as well. To be sure, our own Plymouth pilgrims were fleeing religious persecution, but chose not to stay in the Netherlands because they didn't want the next generation to lose their ethnic identity and become Dutch. But those who left England to found Virginia were in search of economic opportunity.

What of those who leave their homeland today? I think of the many Mexicans and Central Americans who find their way to the United States through both legal channels and through passage into this country in contravention of U.S. immigration law. It is an issue of huge importance, and our adult education program is offering a six-week class to explore the subject, beginning this morning. I would add that the constant refrain through the Hebrew social prophets<sup>2</sup> is to safeguard the welfare of the widow, the orphan, and the alien in our midst...in other words, the most economically vulnerable members of society. And as Christians, it is our duty to heed the words of the prophets and hear what they have to say in our day.



We know that they magi “left for their own country by another road.” But we never get to learn what became of them, how their lives might have been transformed once they had gotten home. One tradition allows that one of the magi started the Coptic church in Egypt, but we really don't know. Wherever we travel, whether it is around the world or across the street, if we have open hearts, open eyes, and open minds, we can perhaps be transformed by the journey. And when we are called to a pilgrimage – whether it's “pilgrimage of reverse mission” or an extended trip or just the opportunity to see things with new eyes right where we are, let us open ourselves to the experience.

I have a strong suspicion that most of us tend to search in all the wrong places for what we desire, which is relationship with God and one another. But it isn't so much **where** we're looking as it is **how** we're looking. For any walk can turn into a walk of faith; any trip can be made into a pilgrimage; any life can be transformed into a journey of faith, so long as we have the intention to make it so and eyes opened to the mysteries of the universe around us.

Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Jer. 7.6, 22.3, Ez. 22.29, Zech. 7.10, Mal. 3.5,