

Christmas happens once a year, but we do not often have time to focus on the characters and what we can learn from the characters in the Christmas Story. Today we will learn what we can from the Shepherds and the Wisemen. These two very different and yet very familiar Christmas stories share very peculiar outcomes. Let's listen to them again.

Luke 2:8-20

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Matthew 2:1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people, Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I just love these two stories – more than just for the songs that we sing of them – but because of the wonderful things that we learn through them. We learn about God and about God’s special call to all people. And we can begin to understand different methods and processes of faith development.

First, let me explain what I am trying to do here – and, perhaps what I’m NOT doing here. I’m NOT preaching about epiphany nor am I preaching the Christmas story – but rather about how God moves in us and through us differently – but just as brightly.

Let’s look at the wisemen. We read about the wisemen – or magi, as foreigners, scientists in the loosest sense of the word. Likely they were Zoroastrians from Persia – followers of One good God – but not Jews. These magi were not one-offs – likely for centuries astrologers, prophets, wise men, sages, and oracles were reading the signs in the stars predicting the coming of a king that would bring peace to the world. I can only imagine how long they waited, debated, and traveled to find this king that was foretold through prophesy and sign. This kind of prediction was not a fool-proof method of Messiah-hunting; they, obviously took many a wrong path (like going to Herod), yet when they did arrive, they found the Child, gave him gifts, and left by a different route. They had come to offer him the prophesied gifts of gold – for his kingship, frankincense for his divinity and myrrh for his humanity and they left for home – taking with them a hope and joy for the future.

Of course, these magi were not Hebrews. They were from outside of the house of Israel – they were, definitely unclean and not at all welcome to worship in the temple. Likely, any who met them or spoke with them were considered unclean because of their interactions with them. And yet, even though they were outside of what was then known as the people of God, God still called out to them through dreams and visions, prophesy and sign and they recognized these as messages from God.

They were able to see and live into God’s promises with expectation and joy – already years before their fulfilment.

The shepherds, unlike the magi, were watching their sheep lambing in the field when suddenly the whole sky lit up and the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and they were frightened. It’s fairly obvious that they were frightened because, like all the other times the angel of the LORD visited people, the angel always had to say, “Do not be afraid.” We don’t know what the angel looked like that visited the shepherds, but earlier in the book of Ezekiel, he describes the cherubim as being wheels within wheels and wings and feathers and everything covered in eyes. I would be terrified too.

Getting over their astonishment, the shepherds then heard this angel proclaim good news of great joy, and a whole host – an army-full of angels sang a mighty astounding chorus to God. I think that I would be stunned – and likely look around at my companions to see if they’re seeing the same thing I am. It sounds as though all the shepherds heard this and then, when it was over, they RAN to where Jesus was laid in the manger. There they met and praised him, and then left – telling everyone they knew and met of what they had seen and experienced.

Like the magi, there are several things to note in this story. First, the shepherds were with their flock on a hillside at night. The flock was NOT alone in the sheep pen – but were being closely watched. Commentaries abound with interpretation about this – and all agree that the sheep were likely being closely watched because they were lambing. Now, if timing matters to you, then you’re probably not going to like the fact that lambing doesn’t happen in the bleak midwinter, but it is in the spring when little day-old lambs are seen springing joyfully in the fields near their mothers.

Because they were in the middle of lambing, the shepherds were also considered unclean. They were unclean because of the birthing and the blood and body fluids and all sorts of stuff that's involved with ewes giving birth. The ewe may have trouble and the shepherd needed to help. They would definitely need to be on the look-out for wild animals that were attracted to the smell of birthing and the chance for an easy newborn meal.

Similarly, the shepherds were likely tired – oh so exhausted from the constant vigilance. They were likely not looking nor feeling their best – and certainly not presentable as “temple clean” in their current state.

In the sudden excitement of the night the unexpected busy, preoccupied shepherds needed a stark light and startling announcement to leave their birthing ewes to the elements and the wild animals and likely their whole livelihood to see this wonderful child of God.

I don't know whether you noticed, but the two stories – those of the magi and those of the shepherds mirror the different ways that people come to Christ too. We see this in the stories in the New Testament and we see these ways of faith development in our own stories too.

Simon Peter was a Galilean – from Capernaum, a faithful follower of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – a true Child of Israel.

Like many of his brothers, he was nurtured in the faith through teachers in the synagogue and in the home. He had known about God and was looking forward to the coming Messiah like any good Jewish boys at his time. When he met Jesus, he continued to learn and was prodded and nurtured to see God in a new way.

When he was called by the Messiah, he left his occupation – the support for his family – and gave up much of his life to follow Jesus. And yet, he was unable to fully grasp the love and grace of God until he heard, saw, and was deeply moved and forgiven by the call of the Risen Lord.

Jesus' conversation with Peter on the beach so long ago encouraged and empowered him to go farther with his faith - past discussion over nets - to witness to the Jews; to help tend, feed, and transform those who already had a foundational faith in God and to offer the new Church the grounding riches of discipleship, tradition, history and ritual.

Like the magi who travelled long and far on a promise before reaching the Christ child, Peter's was a long circuitous journey to faith transformation. He continued to experience transformational moments working in his life through visions, debates, experiences, and through witnessing to others.

Like the shepherds who were instantly stunned by the call of the angels and left their field and sheep to find the Christ, we have Saul's conversion and radical witness to the Gentiles. Saul's conversion to Christianity was motivated by the challenging questions, the physically stunning and blinding light of Jesus' presence, but also through his transformed insight into the grace, forgiveness and love of God in Jesus shown to him by Ananias – one whom he would have persecuted.

The light, the voice, the command, the blindness, and the healing worked together to ultimately transform Saul's life – leading him to convert.

Saul was NOT welcome when he first appeared to the early Christians – but we read later in Acts and in his letters, that Saul/Paul was called to witness to the Gentiles – to show, teach, exhort, and challenge those with no faith in God towards a transformed relationship to God and conversion from their former lifestyle and beliefs to Christianity.

Unfortunately, life together in the burgeoning Christian community was not all peaches and cream especially between Peter and Paul. Peter, a long-time follower of Christ who had been through trials, tribulations and received grace after grace, was the leader of the Church when Paul arrived on the scene in Jerusalem. Paul, who formerly persecuted the Christians, was now suddenly preaching about Jesus, performing miracles, and expecting his opinion to be considered just as highly as the disciples' who had been with Jesus from the beginning.

A number of misunderstandings, confrontations, and accusations discolored and prevailed throughout their relationship. We read about these in Acts, in Galatians, and in other Epistles to the churches. Many of their disagreements were based on the conflict between tradition based on a long history of faith, and new ways of thinking.

I can just hear Peter muttering under his breath: “Who is this highfalutin preacher anyway? Did Jesus serve HIM food? Did he weep at Jesus’ death? Did HE look in the grave and find it empty? Did HE receive the holy spirit at Pentecost?”

I can hear Paul muttering to himself: “Who does Peter think he is, anyway? Was he hit over the head with the risen Jesus? Did he experience the amazing power of the gospel firsthand?”

And yet, like the magi and like the shepherds, both were witness and gave joyful witness to God’s miracle birthed through the presence of the risen Christ.

Throughout the centuries of Christianity arguments, debates, reformations, wars and even martyrs have resulted from this same disagreement. Which way to Christ is better? The worldwide church today is filled and sustained by both wisemen and women and shepherds or sometimes a combination of the two.

I cannot help but reflect on the life stories that I have heard in my years of pastoring – both in a church and in the hospital as chaplain. Many people whom I have met and ministered are very strong Christians who have grown up in the church and have come to love Christ through continually seeking, discussing, worshipping, learning to trust and occasionally catching glimpses of a mysterious God. These are the “magi” or “wisemen and wisewomen” as it were. These people tell of relying on God for their sense of hope and strength and have an enduring faith that God will be with them even during their times of trial. Their acceptance of the call to relationship with Jesus Christ is not gained just by being born into a Christian family or growing up in the church. Instead, it is a personal, voluntary decision.

Likewise, I have met those whose lives and habits have been radically affected, altered, and inspired by experiencing the risen Christ with their whole being, like being struck by lightning. Like the shepherds, the choice to “follow” was not a choice but a compulsion that has completely changed their path.

My own story, and perhaps yours as well, is perhaps a mixture of the two. I consider myself a wisewoman, yet I have had deep and meaningful, sometimes awesome insights and visions that have changed the direction of my path toward developing my own personal faith.

I recall especially after a prayer meeting in my teens having a vision of a wall crumbling. I was filled with such joy that I couldn't stop laughing. That incident became an important turning point in my personal faith story. Yet this event did not determine the course of my faith – but, rather, it was the defining transforming moment where the stone wall of shame and unworthiness was broken. In its place was a turning – a pulling – a path laid before me – hope the crushed stone and grace the level packed earth beneath. My heart – in that moment glimpsed the wonder of God's love and I am forever changed.

Our calling, transformations and conversions to faith can take many forms from exquisite insights in everyday life - to powerful experiences. We in our churches are not unlike the relationship between Peter and Paul...our stories and beliefs about transformation and conversion can easily overpower the important fact that God calls to us all. We get caught up in thinking about and debating about nitpicky things and forget that God called the magi and the shepherds BOTH; that God called the life-long disciple and the suddenly enlightened former persecutor BOTH; that God called the obvious sinner and the closeted sinner BOTH.

The church is, according to the Mennonite Confession of Faith, “the assembly of those who voluntarily commit themselves to follow Christ in life and to be accountable to one another and to God while recognizing that the church is imperfect and thus in constant need of repentance.”

The church is called to live and to be the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world. How can we best minister to the world when we expend so much energy disagreeing about the worth of our neighbors' journey to faith? It is what we do with our faith that will determine the course of our relationship with each other and with our community and with God. We easily forget that our story, like that of the wisemen and shepherds **is contingent** on what we do **after** we have met the Christ.

As a church, then, we are left with several options on how to handle our differences. One, we can split. We can refuse to get along – talk trash against the other because our side is the best. We can find a church that will cater to OUR style and stay there in complacency.

Two, we can decide to ignore our differences, “They don't matter in the long run,” walk away from conflicting ideas and opinions because “Good Christians always get along.” But eventually the church will die out because people don't actually feel welcome or accepted. No true healing and transformation can occur in the community because we don't hold each other accountable; we are shallow and refuse to delve into the chaotic deeps.

Or, three, we acknowledge our differences when they arise – remembering that our way to the love of Jesus is just as valid as others – and with this new awareness discuss, learn, grow, mature, collaborate, argue, and disagree – and by doing so get to know each other as God's kingdom at a deeper, more insightful, and deliciously joyful way. Our faith broadens and our hearts become more welcoming as we learn from each other about a God who reaches out and loves all people personally.

Like the magi and the shepherds, we will hear the call, see the signs; go, seek out, learn, and discover, praise, and adore the Risen Christ. And, like the magi and the shepherds, or like Peter and Paul, our growth and transformation after we hear the call to follow, unites us as seekers and proclaimers of the Risen Lord.

For there is a wideness in God's mercy – like the wideness of the sea and God is calling to all people different songs of liberty.