

We chalked the doorpost.

20 + C + M + B + 17

This Epiphany, the incarnation is still visible.

BY ANNA MADSEN

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I told my daughter Else that the Day of Epiphany meant no more singing about partridges in pear trees for an entire year. Plus, we'd get to write on our new house!

"Really," she said.

"Yep. We are going to write 20 + C + M + B + 17 right above our door. Those are the initials of the names of the wise men who came to visit Jesus."

"Really," she said. "What were their names?"

Silence.

Every year I forget.

Suddenly...

"Melchior! Melchior was one!"

I said. "The others were...something else."

Silence.

"So how do you know that B doesn't stand for, say, Bob?"

Silence.

Then, of course, we got the giggles, picturing wise men with names like Chuck, Marvin and Bob.

A DOORWAY TO EPIPHANY

"Chalking the doorposts" is a longstanding Epiphany tradition more often practiced by Christians in Europe. The letters C, M and B don't just represent the (presumed) names of the magi (Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar). These three letters stand for a prayer: "Christus mansionem benedicat," or "Christ

bless this house."

This tradition harkens back to the story of the Exodus, in which the Israelites smeared the blood of a sacrificial lamb over their doorposts as a means of protection from the angel of death. It also reminds Christians of the hospitality that Mary and Joseph extended to the Magi. Although they were non-Jews (i.e., Gentiles) and foreigners, the magi were welcomed to meet and get to know the baby Jesus.

"Epiphany" is a word that comes from two Greek words, epi, which means "on" or "to" and phainein which means "to show." I like to call Epiphany the season of God-made knowings—of

attentiveness to the ways that God and God's agenda shine through our world, expressing unexpected hope, new birth and the defiance of death.

The biblical stories key to the season of Epiphany are:

- the visit of the Magi (always January 6);
- Jesus' baptism (the first Sunday of the season) when we recall God's blessing of Jesus' ministry of service, forgiving and justice (and our baptismal call to make manifest the same);
- the wedding feast where Jesus turned the water into wine (I think God's work here includes celebrating good food, good wine and good love); and
- the transfiguration of Jesus (the last Sunday in the season) when he went to the mountaintop and shone like a pillar of light.

These texts invite us to see God's agenda by opening our eyes to the way God works in the world and how God calls us to work in the world.

Each of these texts involves some element of surprise: Jews welcome Gentiles...with gifts? God blesses a son with the water of life...and sends him out into the world where, by virtue of this blessing he will walk the path to death... a good thing, and we're to do it too? Jesus replenishes the wine at the wedding (saving the family from disgrace, yes, but also, maybe God would have us celebrate good love with good food and good wine, and maybe life is too short to drink bad wine)? And

then Jesus, illuminated, chooses to not stay on the mountain where it is beautiful, but to return to the places where the hard work awaits?

EPIPHANY IS WELCOME

This year, after many difficult pandemic months, we as a people, and certainly I as a person, couldn't be more ready for (or more in need of) this season. Epiphany is welcome—as were the Magi. It is a perfect time for us to see, and as followers of Christ, make known that the incarnation of Jesus can still be visible, can still be touched, can still surprise.

Epiphany is not, by the way, a season of glossing over or being blinded or blindsided. God's illumination causes us to see things—or have things seen—that we would rather keep in the dark. Epiphany is the season of God-made knowing and God made manifest. It's the season of noticing God in both small and large expressions and visions. It's the season of announcing that God wishes there to be peace, reconciliation, kindness, redemption, repentance and release from anger, fear and resentment...as well as active ways of making each of these come to pass.

But on the Day of Epiphany a half-decade ago, I could not find chalk. I'd like to say that it was because we hadn't unpacked it yet, but the truth was, we were fairly-well unpacked. It's hard to take part in the tradition of chalking

the doorways when you have no chalk.

My son Karl's Personal Care Attendant (PCA), Micaiah, was a smart, good-humored young man, dedicated to Karl and willing to take on our family's quirks. That day, Micaiah took note of my search for chalk and my mutterings that maybe ashes from our wood stove would work? Or maybe oil crayons? Or ketchup? Or mustard?

Five minutes after he left for the day, he called to see if I'd found any chalk yet. "Nope," I grumbled. "Okay," he said. "Hold on, because I'm coming back to your house."

Micaiah returned with an enormous box of chalk. What a great surprise! I couldn't help but notice how the sunlight illuminated his gift.

M was for Melchior ...and Marvin ...and Micaiah!

Our new home was chalked with this gift—marked with the blessing of Christ, announcing that all are welcome. And since Else and I had come to feel that we also couldn't really forget the Chucks and Marvins and Bobs of the world, she graced our back door with a chalking for them too.

This year, during the season of Epiphany, let the God-made-knowings commence.

May you notice large and small and surprising manifestations of God in your life and in the world. And may you be a manifest presence of the same. 🌸