

When I was in high school, my family took a trip to Chicago. And we did all the touristy things one does in the Windy City – Shedd Aquarium, Navy Pier, the Bean – and it also happened to be Lolapalooza at the time. Side note, you don't have to buy tickets to Lolapalooza – just hang out anywhere near Lincoln park and you'll hear the full concert lineup just fine.

Anyway, the one thing on everyone's list while visiting Chicago is to have authentic deep dish pizza and we were told by several that Lou Malnati's was the place to go. So we got into our rental car and plugged in the address to the GPS – that's what we used before smart phones – and headed downtown. But as we got closer to downtown, the GPS began to struggle because of the tall buildings that surrounded us. And in as pleasant a tone as it could muster, the voice of the GPS said, "Rerouting." So we would follow the new route, only to hear again, "Rerouting." On and on it went. Eventually, we decided to park and ask someone where Lou Malnati's was. Pizza was had. And there was much rejoicing.

Epiphany, by its nature and as Matthew tells it here, is a moment of rerouting. It's a story of rerouting for those who know nothing about it, as well as for those who know it best. And it's a reminder to all of us that we are on the journey of an unwinding mystery, marked by people and moments that invite us to reroute deeper into the love of God. Epiphany, told through the eyes of magi and stars and kings, is about openness of God and the limitless ways God will call to us next. And in that way, whenever we tell it, Epiphany becomes a story for us, wherever on this journey we might be.

Epiphany is about rerouted magi. The magi came from somewhere east of Israel, most likely Persia or one of the surrounding countries in the middle east. And contrary to songs and Christmas pageants, they were not kings and the idea that they were wise men would be laughable to a lot of people in Jesus' time. Today, we would consider them as wise as fortunetellers or horoscope writers. They were astrologers who studied and made predictions based on star patterns and cosmic events. And that means that they really don't have any business being in Israel searching for a child born king to a people that would have considered them idolatrous pagans.

In other words, the magi seemingly do not belong. They don't fit in. They have no place here. And yet, here they are. Because God spoke to them in a way they could understand. God met them where they were at and brought them to an opportunity for newness in body, mind, and spirit. They studied the stars and so God calls them through a star to encounter, not a god who is distant and far off, but the God who is with them. It's interesting to note that the star didn't lead them directly to Bethlehem. They go to Jerusalem and then, only after hearing the prophecy of the Scriptures, does the star lead them to Jesus. When asked why this was, Martin Luther said, "Because God wanted to teach us that we should follow the Scriptures and not our own murky ideas."

Maybe we're like the magi. Maybe we don't have it all figured out and maybe we even have thoughts and ideas and beliefs that might not fit the mainstream. Maybe we're a little bit lost, but still have hope that there's someone out there who cares about us, who loves us, and who desires to be in relationship with us. Maybe there's someone who is calling to us. Maybe we're like the magi and our path to God has been by a different way.

Epiphany is also about rerouted kings. It's about rerouted religious leaders and stalwarts. The one's who grew up with the "right" beliefs. The one's who were born into it or came to it and have never waived or left it. Isn't it interesting that the religious leaders know exactly where the Messiah was to be born? And isn't it interesting that when they hear of the star, their reaction isn't joy, but terror? Isn't it interesting that they insist on sending the magi as messengers, rather than going to Bethlehem to see for themselves what God is up to? Comfort seems like a good direction to go, but comfort only works so long as who God is and how God acts doesn't change.

And yet, even for as stubborn as they can be, I believe God wanted more for Herod and the chief priests and scribes. Perhaps this was an opportunity to reroute and they missed it. Perhaps it was a chance to cast aside their fear and actually live for the sake of love. And perhaps they couldn't hear the voice calling them to reroute or perhaps they didn't want to. But maybe we're not so different either. Maybe God is inviting us to step into what we do not know, trusting that God is with us, leading us into newness of understanding and life. Maybe this Epiphany is the start of a beautiful transformation – for you and for me and for us.

You know, here at Joy we say that all are welcome. And I've been thinking about that a lot in recent weeks. And I think what it means is that we want to be a place where we are constantly listening to the guiding voice of the Holy Spirit – that we want to be people who are open to being rerouted. Because we know what it's like to be the magi, to feel like we don't belong. We know what it's like to grow in understanding, to be transformed by the grace and love Jesus so much that we are no longer the same.

And we also know what it's like to be the guardians of what has been, seeking to protect the ways we have experienced the presence of God. We don't always take every opportunity and at times, we flat out miss it. So when we say, "All are welcome" perhaps it's an acknowledgment that we won't always get it right. And maybe that means, "All are welcome" is a prayer – that we want to continue to grow as a community of welcome because that is how we have encountered the grace of God. All are welcome because without you, we'll never continue to grow into who the body of Christ is and can be. All are welcome because without you, we might miss the opportunity to be changed by the grace and love of God in Christ once again. All are welcome. And that means we live each moment ready to hear the Spirit's call: "Rerouting." Amen.