

Wisdom and Change—Matthew 2: 9-12
(January 27, 2019-4th Sunday after Epiphany)

The last line of the story of the Magi has always captured me; “they left for their own country by another road.” For Matthew it is a very practical statement. A dream warned the wise ones what King Herod was up to, using the travellers to ferret out and kill the child, who he perceived as a threat to his power. I like to think of that line however as more of a metaphor for the transformation that took place with the Magi and that can take place with us when we come face to face with the wisdom of incarnation, of God amongst us. Without change there is no wisdom, because ultimately wisdom is seen in how we live our lives. We demonstrate that we have learned something from life by the way we adapt over time to life’s learning. It’s one thing to know something but quite another to live it. As people on the Jesus path we go home by another road when we begin to recognize God’s presence among us, when we begin to perceive the sacredness of life. Incarnation is the great wisdom of Christianity.

Sometimes this wisdom comes upon us by surprise. There are moments when life simply takes over, when all the distractions and illusions are stripped away. The birth of a child, we stand silent as we experience the weight, sound, and smell of a little human being in our arms that only a few months previously did not exist at all. Death has a way of setting aside distractions and stripping us of illusions. In the midst of loss we are confronted with the clarity that nothing matters except love. Sometimes it is an experience of nature, we come upon a scene of great beauty and it astounds us, it seems to push everything else to the side and overwhelms us with reverence. In these moments something shifts inside of us, we go home by another road. For a period of time our lives are marked by a greater compassion, gentleness and reverence. We have allowed the wisdom of incarnation to change us.

Most of the time though it is a real challenge to allow the wisdom of incarnation to change us. We live in a world that places the highest value on independence, strength and achievement. In such a world people and creation itself become objects to be manipulated in pursuit of our goals. When we engage in this way of being it becomes very difficult to see the wisdom of incarnation, the presence of the sacred in our lives. It’s one of the great sources of conflict between indigenous people and the settler community when it comes to natural resource development. The western European mindset sees creation as a series of resources to be exploited for security and wealth. Indigenous cultures see this as well, but they also see in the trees, the water and the land an expression of the sacred to which we are all related and connected.

This can happen in our personal relationships as well. Sometimes even with the best of intentions. Brenda was someone I knew who has since died. Brenda’s son Chris, a man in his thirties, lived with a mild intellectual disability and diabetes. Brenda made Chris’s independence her life’s project. In many ways Chris was lucky to have her, she was always there when he faltered. Chris faltered a lot. He was in and out of various apartments, supportive housing units and hospitals. Brenda was always checking up on him, asking about his diabetes management, his various appointments, intervening for

him. But, Brenda wasn't happy with their relationship. Over the years Chris grew increasingly distant. Calls took a long time to be returned and then he shared only the bare minimum. Interactions with Chris evoked all kinds of stress for Brenda, there was always the possibility of a housing drama or a health crisis. She felt like she was failing as an advocate and as a mother. From Chris's perspective, he felt like he was his mother's project, an object in her plans to make him who she thought he should be. He felt defective, he was something that his mother needed to fix. Neither of them liked the road their relationship was travelling.

When we live by the values of the world it can be difficult to see the wisdom of incarnation, to perceive the sacred in our midst and so we continue to travel the same old roads. To take another road there is a certain amount of letting go that needs to happen. T.S. Eliot, in his poem, *Journey of the Magi*, speaking as one of the wise ones say this,

*All this was a long time ago, I remember
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different*

The wisdom of the incarnation of God in Jesus that leads to change is to perceive in the birth, a death as well. Death to the values that veil the presence of the sacred in our lives and prevent us from going home by another road. That road leaves behind the objectification of people and creation, the one taken by the Herod's of this world, and has us travel the way of right relationship, where we perceive the presence of the sacred, the incarnation of God in each other and in creation. The road of right relationship is the one that leads us home, to an experience of unity beyond all the artificial divisions we impose on creation. That changes everything.

Brenda was at her wit's end with Chris. She was exhausted from the emotional ups and downs of taking responsibility for Chris's life with little discernible progress. Brenda decided she had to step back, at least temporarily for the sake of her health. She scaled back the number of times she called Chris. When they did speak she no longer engaged in the checklist of things he was supposed to have done. Instead she asked how he was, asked about his friends and his week. She stopped giving advice unless asked, she no longer took the lead. Slowly, the relationship began to shift. Chris became more and more open with his mother, sharing his struggles, disappointments and the small triumphs. The calls lasted longer and now included some texts in-between. As Chris felt himself being trusted and respected, he began to trust Brenda more and more and as he trusted more he shared more and the relationship blossomed. Brenda told me that even though it was hard to watch Chris struggle, their relationship had never been better. She had her son back. By ceasing to treat Chris as a project, as an object that needed fixing the way was opened for Brenda to see Chris anew—not as a burden, a source of anxiety and stress, but her beloved child whose company she could enjoy. A death, a birth, a

different road leading them home—the wisdom of incarnation at play, the wisdom that changes everything.

Ultimately the wise life is shaped by the learning that one gleans from life itself; wisdom is seen in change. To see God at the centre of life and to shape ourselves according to that wisdom is to become more God-like ourselves. We become what we always were, but which was hidden; creatures made in the image of God. Writer Anne Lamott says; “I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.” To live the wisdom of incarnation is to be taken home by another road. Thank be for this grace.