

For Epiphany we hear that the magi followed the signs of a star in the heavens, desiring to greet the King. Scholars tell us that they were likely Zoroastrian priests, followers of an ancient religion that read the stars and the sky. Although we



Lauren Wright Pittman Shining Hope

think three, it is probable that the visitors from a “foreign land” (Persia-outside of Israel) would have traveled in a caravan of people, (even with women as members of their party). The story in Matthew is the fulfilling of the promise that Good News would reach out beyond the people of Israel; God leads the magi to the Christ child through the stars and light of the heavens. What happens after the giving of gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, we are told, is that the magi do not return to the fearful and brutal King Herod; they return home by another route.

Today’s lesson does not include Herod’s seeking out all the baby boys under the age of two to kill them, which mirrors the babies killed by Pharaoh at the time of Moses, nor the young family’s Escape into Egypt, but these are part of the holy stories that surround the Christ child in the Gospel of Matthew. Joseph, warned by an angel in a dream, escapes to Egypt before Herod finds Jesus, and then returns to Nazareth, where Jesus grows up. In this familiar story, Jesus enters into the story and tradition of Moses, who frees God’s people, leading them out of bondage into freedom, bringing the Gift of the Law; Jesus brings an abiding relationship with God.

The Old Testament reading for Isaiah, “Arise shine, for your light has come,” is God’s revelation of God’s own self in the people. This response comes after the captivity of Israel by Babylon and the people return to Jerusalem. The people themselves will be the light in a new way. It is not a case of the people responding to God out of fear and changing their ways; God comes. God’s glory shines and the people respond to God’s glory and are the light themselves. It is out of an attitude of thanksgiving for the one who comes to lead the way that the people practice justice.

We retell the story of the magi in our time in a variety of ways, perhaps asking, “how does God lead us to the Christ who comes into the world?” T.S. Eliot, in the poem *The Journey of the Magi* reflects on how this journey changes the Magi and us. It is good for us to ask how we are changed today. What is our story?

Pastor Susan

*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; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.* T.S. Eliot fourth stanza

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=7070> T.S. Eliot, “The Journey of the Magi” in *Collected Poems: 1909–1962*



Cathédrale d'Amiens

A New Framing Story

Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* popularized the term "paradigm shift." [1] A paradigm is a set of beliefs, images, concepts, and structures that govern the way we think about something. Kuhn (1922–1996) said that paradigm change becomes necessary when the previous paradigm becomes so full of holes and patchwork "fixes" that a complete overhaul is necessary. The shift in thinking which might have felt threatening at one time now appears as the only way forward and as a real lifeline. I hope we are at one of these critical junctures again. Might we be willing to adopt a new set of beliefs, values, and systems that could change (and maybe even save) humanity and our world? My colleague Brian McLaren is a former English teacher and has much to teach us about the power of stories. He uses the language of a "framing story" to describe the same phenomenon Kuhn observed. Brian says a framing story "gives people direction, values, vision, and inspiration by providing a framework for their lives. It tells them who they are, where they come from, where they are, what's going on, where things are going, and what they should do." [2] While we all have stories that answer those questions on a personal level, a "framing story" dictates the general beliefs of a culture, nation, religion, and even humanity as a whole.

Brian writes convincingly that "our growing list of global crises [Richard: even before the COVID-19 pandemic], together with our inability to address them effectively, gives us strong evidence that our world's dominant framing story is failing." [3] He reflects:

If it [our framing story] tells us that the purpose of life is for individuals or nations to accumulate an abundance of possessions and to experience the maximum amount of pleasure during the maximum number of minutes of our short lives, then we will have little reason to manage our consumption. If our framing story tells us that we are in life-and-death competition with each other . . . then we will have little reason to seek reconciliation and collaboration and nonviolent resolutions to our conflicts. . . .

But if our framing story tells us that we are free and responsible creatures in a creation made by a good, wise, and loving God, and that our Creator wants us to pursue virtue, collaboration, peace, and mutual care for one another and all living creatures, and that our lives can have profound meaning if we align ourselves with God's wisdom, character, and dreams for us . . . then our society will take a radically different direction, and our world will become a very different place. [4] As Christians, we have the opportunity to live the story that was given to us at the very beginning (Genesis 1), that creation is "good," even "very good," and that it is our vocation to nurture and grow such goodness wherever we can.

References:

[1] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed. (University of Chicago Press: 2012, ©1962). [2] Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Thomas Nelson: 2007), 5–6. [3] *Ibid.*, 68. [4] *Ibid.*, 67.

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