

January 3, 2021
The Epiphany of Our Lord
Matthew 2:1-12
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Unbelievable

A few weeks before Advent, I signed myself up to take a writing workshop offered by our Bishop, Jim Hazelwood on Monday nights during Advent. The theme of the workshop was, “Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography”.

When the first Monday in Advent came along, I had started to wonder if it had been a good idea, to have blocked out that time for three Mondays during a very busy time of year, but I had committed to being there, so I signed onto the Zoom meeting and attended the first workshop. During the first class, we were giving our assignment for the workshop, to write a one-to-two-page story about a something in our own lives that we experienced as spiritual. Those who wanted to were invited to share their story during our last meeting.

I struggled to come up with a story that I hadn’t told before in preaching or some other way, but I finally thought of a new story that I thought was worth telling, and I wrote my story.

During the final class, I was one of the participants who volunteered to read my story and invite feedback. I asked people to critique my story in terms of its structure. Was there too much background before I got to the heart of the story? Was the story engaging? Was there a way that I could tell the story in a better way, to invite the reader or the listener in?

Even though one could make an argument that I do it all the time, I was still nervous about sharing my story. After all, when I'm preaching, even though I might spend some time talking about myself and my own story, I'm always doing that in service of another and much more important story than my own. I'm doing it in service of God's story, so it's not really about me.

At this workshop, though, I was asking a group of people, mostly strangers, to listen to my story, just because it was my story. I didn't have a larger motivation, just sharing my story and hoping that it was worth their time, during a busy season, to listen to it.

I read my story and received some very positive comments as well as some very helpful suggestions about how I could structure my story more effectively to engage the readers or hearers. I really appreciated the feedback.

And then someone said, "I find it hard to believe that you had the kind of insights that you say you had in that story in such a short time. I also find it hard to believe that all of that happened at the age you said you were. Most people struggle with those kinds of questions for their whole lives and you want us to believe that you figured it all out when you were 17 and in about two minutes?"

I was shocked. I was not expecting someone to critique the content of my story. After all, it was my story, a scene from my past. The workshop was about writing our spiritual autobiography. What would have been the point of telling a story that didn't really happen to me? No one had told anyone else who shared their story that they thought that they were making their story up.

Other people, including Bishop Hazelwood, jumped to my defense, saying that many people did indeed have the kind of moments of spiritual or

religious clarity that I had described in my story, a kind of “time stood still” moment, and that he said he had no trouble believing that what I said had happened had happened.

I appreciated the support, but still, I was shocked and remain shocked that someone had jumped to the conclusion that the story that I had told was untrue. Why would I make something like that up?

That moment of doubt, of disbelief in the story that I shared about an experience that I had had, got me thinking about the Christmas story.

We are coming to the end of the Christmas season. There are just two and a half days left of Christmas. We’re on the day of ten lords a ‘leaping and there’s just enough time for eleven pipers piping and twelve drummers drumming. Wednesday, January 6th will be the day of Epiphany, the festival that we are celebrating in our worship service today. Today, as our last time when we’re gathered for a worship service during the Christmas season seems like a good time to think about the Christmas story, as we have experienced it from the beginning.

An argument could be made that it starts with Mary, with the gospel reading from the gospel of Luke that we heard on the fourth Sunday of Advent. Mary being met by the angel Gabriel and hearing the news that she had found favor with God, that she had been chosen to bear God’s son, that she would have a child, even though she was a virgin. Mary’s first response was not to believe it. Her first response was, “How can this be?”

Of course, her ultimate response was to accept what the angel had told her; was to accept God’s miraculous will in her life, but her first response was to question, even to doubt. At first, what the angel told her sounded unbelievable.

The second story of Christmas is the story of how Joseph reacted when he heard that Mary was pregnant. We don't hear how Joseph learned about Mary's pregnancy; maybe she told him herself, maybe a neighbor or family member share Mary's secret, maybe he just noticed the tell-tale signs of her body changing to bring forth a new life? We don't know and the gospels don't tell us.

What we do know is what says in the gospel of Matthew, that when he learned of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly. He was not going to marry her, this woman who had gotten herself pregnant by another man while they were engaged. If Mary had told him the true story of how she had become pregnant, Joseph didn't believe her.

It wasn't until an angel had come to Joseph in a dream and told him that Mary's child was conceived of God, that he would be his people's savior, that he would be Emmanuel, that Joseph believed the unbelievable things that were happening in his life, to his family, for his people, for the world.

And then there was the Christmas story itself. The story that we heard on Christmas Eve, of Mary giving birth in a stable, of Jesus being wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger, of shepherds in the fields, of angels telling good news, announcing Jesus' birth and filling the skies with their praises to God, of shepherds going to Bethlehem to see the child who had been born, of the story being told.

The shepherds told Mary and Joseph what they had seen, what they had experienced, what the angels had told them about their child, Jesus, lying in a manger. The story from the gospel of Luke says, "When [the shepherds] saw this (the child lying in the manger), they made known what had been told them about this child..." (Luke 2:17).

Upon first reading I thought that that meant that they told only Mary and Joseph what they had experienced, the angel's announcement and song and the confirmation of the angel's story in the discovery of the baby in the manger, but the text implies that they told more than just Mary and Joseph. The indication is that they became Jesus' first Public Relations firm, Shepherds Incorporated. Because the way that the story goes, they told a lot of people, everyone, anyone who would listen to their story, to the story of how God had spoken to them, reached them, shared with them, invited them to be a part of the story of how God had come to bless the world, to be present to the world, to bring peace and great joy to all the people.

The text tells us that “**all** who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them” (Luke 2:18). The word **all** implies a lot of people. But what does the word **amazed** mean? Does it mean that all the people that they told believed them? Amazed means: greatly surprised; astounded; suddenly filled with wonder (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/amazed?s=t>). It does not necessarily imply belief. When one is surprised by something, or astounded by it, or when one wonders about it, that does not mean that one necessarily believes it.

Finally, we have today's story, the story of the visit of the wise men to the Jesus and his parents. They had traveled a long way from their home in the east, because they had seen a new star in the heavens, that told them that a new king had been born. They went to the place where they imagined that this new king would be found. The capital city of the small province over which the star shone most brightly. They came to Jerusalem and they questioned, “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” (Matthew 2:2).

When King Herod heard about it, he made efforts to learn more about this new king, where would he be born and when exactly the star had appeared, so that he would know exactly how long this threat to his throne had existed. Then he sent the wise men to Bethlehem as his unwitting spies, so that they could come back and tell him where the child was.

The wise men went and found the Jesus and Mary, not in a stable, but settled in a house and they knelt before him and gave him gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And after they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went home by another road.

I wonder if, when they got home, they told the people in their own country where they had been, what they had seen, what they had done. I wonder if people believed them. The wise men clearly thought that the sign of the star was true, that they had, indeed, seen a miraculous king in the child and his mother, living in a simple house in a small town, five miles outside of the capital city, of a small and occupied province in the far reaches of the Roman Empire. But if they told anyone where they had been during their long absence, I wonder if anyone believed them. I wonder if people laughed at them for making such a long trip, when it came to what could be considered such an anticlimactic conclusion. I wonder if they story that they told, that in the presence of Jesus, they had been in the presence of someone great, someone whose life was announced by the movement of the stars and whose life was guarded by angels and dreams, was considered by the people who heard it to be unbelievable.

Today we are celebrating those wise men and their journey. Today we are celebrating the Epiphany of our Lord. Epiphany means manifestation, a making clear. Epiphany is celebrated in the church as the day when Jesus' birth, Jesus' presence in the world is revealed to have meaning and importance for all of the people of the world, not just for the Jewish people. In the coming of the gentile kings to bow down before the Jewish Messiah, we learn that this child whose birth we celebrated on Christmas day, born in Bethlehem to ordinary parents, born in the humblest of circumstances, born among strangers, born with only shepherds to celebrate his birth, was truly born a king, a king for all people. The gifts that the wise men gave him marked him as a king. They proclaimed him as a manifestation of the divine, as Emmanuel, God coming to be with us. They foreshadowed his sacrifice, myrrh for a burial, given to a child, who would one day die for the sins of the world.

Epiphany also means, "a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience"

(<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/epiphany?s=t>).

The wise men saw Jesus and they knew, even if no one believed their story, that they were in the presence of a king for the whole world.

The shepherds saw him and they knew that the proclamation of the angels and their song was true. They glorified and praised God, for the promise that had been fulfilled, for the peace that had come into their lives, in knowing that God was with them, even if no one believed their story.

Mary and Joseph looked into the face of the child that God had given them, and they knew that the things that had been said about this child, their child the promises made, were true. They didn't know how his life would

unfold, they didn't know how he would work, this child who they held in their arms, who was God with them, but they knew and it didn't matter what anyone else thought. They were holding Emmanuel, and they would love him and raise him and teach them all that they could and they would ponder the mystery of his life with them and they would watch and see what he would do, how he would live, how he would keep the promises made with his birth.

The story I told in my writing class was about an epiphany that I had, one Sunday in my church, while I was not singing a hymn. And someone told me that it was unbelievable. An unbelievable story, something that could never have happened, not to someone so ordinary, not to someone so young, not to someone so inexperienced, untried, not yet wise to the ways of the world. But it did happen. I know that it did. I was there.

And, also, that's just how epiphanies work. They come to ordinary people, to young women, to righteous men, to unwashed shepherds watching their sheep, to learned men who watch for signs, to teenagers in choir lofts who sing the songs of their ancestors in faith.

And it doesn't matter if anyone else believes it. Because Epiphanies are what Christmas is, one more manifestation of the promise of Jesus' birth. That God is Emmanuel. God with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.