

“A Different Light” / Matthew 2:1-12 / 8 January 2012 (Epiphany)

And after laying eyes on the Newborn Christ, and setting their odd gifts down before him, the Magi went home to their own country...but they returned to it by way of a whole different road. Epiphany: a new revelation, a fresh burst of insight, perhaps a new road that ends up taking you back to the same old place—except that now you see an old place in a new light. Epiphanies happen. And like those Magi of old, once you’ve had an epiphany—perhaps a new vision of who or what God is, or how life ought to be—then you’ll end up going back to your old familiar life, but by way of a whole different road. Perhaps in the skies above your life, a new star is shining in a place that once was dark. That’s Epiphany! One of the greatest joys of the life of faith...or any life.

Let me tell you about my most recent epiphany, and maybe that will give you a better sense for some of the epiphanies in your own life. My epiphany since moving back to Pittsburgh has been music. Now, I’ve always loved music, many different kinds of music: medieval and renaissance music, smooth jazz, sad piano music. I like popular music from the 90s—mostly because it carries me back to a time and a place when the world was, if not my oyster, at least my can of tuna. A time long before I traded the lesser joys of freedom for the greater joys of responsibility. And though the more accountable life I live today is far more rewarding than the freer life of yesterday, I do enjoy an occasional backward glance at things that once were. And nothing quite takes me back to that place like a song by the Red Hot Chili Peppers or Smashing Pumpkins. (Chili peppers and pumpkins today are just things I grow in my garden.)

Consider the songs that can call you back to another time in your life. “Hold on for One More Day,” by Wilson Philips? “Call Me,” by Blondie? “Bridge over Troubled Waters,” by Simon and Garfunkel? “Only the Lonely,” by Roy Orbison? All it takes is a few notes, and you’re the youngster with the beehive hairdo...or pompadour. Music is the great catalyst; only the sense of smell restores our memory more powerfully than music. My grandmother, long after she forgot my name, could still sit at the piano and sing, “Abide with me, fast fall the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide. When other helpers fail, earth’s comforts flee, help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.”

Like language itself, there’s music in every human culture. It’s woven into our ancestral memory and our DNA. But words fail and fall silent. And silence itself can become unbearable. Even then, there are emotional and spiritual places in your life that music alone can reach. I imagine that, 200 million years ago, some nameless protohuman child lay against his mother’s breast and listened to her heartbeat. Then he sat up, picked up two rocks and banged them together, in an attempt to imitate the sound. Voila! The first musical performance, a rock concert! And ever since that day—probably long before it—you and I have had music running through our blood.

Music has its own kind of power. And it holds sway over all of us, including me. But having something in your blood and knowing how it works are two very different things. I never understood how music worked before. I stood outside of it. Oh, like every public school student in Pennsylvania, I was given ample opportunity to learn it. But nothing could make me care about it. The rule at our house was either play in the marching band or take piano lessons plus sing in the school choir. Three years of mandatory piano lessons failed to teach me how to read music. Being forced to sing in the school choir didn’t do the trick. The mechanics of reading music and reproducing sounds bored me silly. Nothing could make me care...until the day I cared.

After we moved back to Pittsburgh, in time (I don't know why) I found myself poking around the edges of my life and sensing a real absence. Or, to put it another way, you might say that I found a new star shining in a part of the sky that had always been dark before. I became keenly aware that, still in my forty-first year, I couldn't play an instrument; I couldn't even sit down at a piano and peck out a melody. And though it never mattered to me before, somehow now I was beginning to care. Maybe this is what a midlife crisis looks like for a quiet Presbyterian minister. I sensed a new desire that I'd never had before. One day, I looked around my otherwise well-rounded life and realized that, though I couldn't even identify musical notes on a page, now I wanted to pick up a piece of sheet music and read it like a book, really hear it in my head.

Well, I won't go into details. But I chose and purchased an instrument and a few basic books and DVD lessons. And on the first day, when I picked up that musical instrument and tried to make music, it barely producing an unhappy little screech. But after much work, by the next day—on exactly the twelfth day of Christmas—I managed to eke out a vaguely recognizable facsimile of my favorite Christmas carol, "All My Heart This Night Rejoices." And perhaps that moment was the beginning of the official epiphany, when the instrument in my hands surprised me with that old German melody, albeit in a sad and tortured state. There was music, such as it was, flowing from me out into the hapless world all around, making our dining room echo with its over-strained notes, so much so that my daughter Greta immediately named the tune and started to sing along. I've made it my New Year's resolution to practice at least five times a week. In addition to bugging Jessica with questions about music theory, like, "Okay, now explain to me again the bottom number on a time signature," I've made her a promise that within three years, I will unleash my musical talents during a Sunday morning service—perhaps in July, when attendance dips below 80. That's how my epiphany occurred. Something I'd seen all my life without really *seeing* it, something that I'd looked past for years, finally claimed me, adding a new dimension to life. It was just...time. And so, I ask, what time is it in your life? Is there a new light shining anywhere in a once dark sky?

Epiphanies! Like Matthew's unnamed "star," a phenomenon of the heavens that cast its unexpected light from a quarter of the sky that had always been dark! I liked it that our annual Christmas pageant here at Bower Hill boasted not three, but four wise men. There might have been 2,000; there might have been 2. Matthew doesn't say. But he does say that an epiphany—a new light in a once dark quadrant—called those old Magi, those Zoroastrian soothsayers, out away from themselves, away from their divinations and their magic, away from their pagan rites, their zodiacs, their astrology, and astronomy, and aromatherapy, and reflexology, their secret arts. A new light called them out away from themselves, out past the edges of their towns, out to the places where they were unknown, out to the places where their language wasn't spoken, calling them yet to follow. Something outside of them was calling them, and it was the tug that they had been waiting for all their lives. Everyone knows that stars don't move. Whatever the Star of Bethlehem was, its strange, new light called out to strange, new people, inviting them into the strange, new faith that God was creating in a bed of straw in Bethlehem.

But don't forget that these strangers, these outsiders, ended up going back to their homes and to their strange arts. But their lives were forever changed. And they went home by way of a whole new road. And this is what the best God-sent epiphanies are: a coming home to yourself in a way that you never knew possible.

Now, if you've read any of the most popular open-minded preachers of our day, you know that much has been made of this notion of "going home by another road." It's not original to me. There's a book called *Home by Another Way* by an Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor. The last time I attended a service at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, in the city, the sermon was about going home by another road. If you google the words "home by another road," you'll come up with a plethora of sermons, books, articles, and essays. And they're all about people who thought they were losing their faith; then they came to some new insight about who God is or what life is about, and in the end the person who believed that he or she was losing faith discovered that their faith, like all living things, was simply changing, expanding past old horizons. They found that their faith was restored to them—except in a new light, to be experienced in new ways. They had been surprised by an epiphany, called out to rustic old Bethlehem where they saw unexpected things, like a king in a feeding trough, then they went home to their faith...by a different road. It's a beautiful idea, for if we keep traveling the same old roads through the life of faith, we'll keep ending up in the same old places. Is there a new light in the night skies of your life, calling you back to old things in new ways?

It's just that sometimes our religious imaginations get stuck in one place when that old Star of Bethlehem would call us forward to another. The author Thomas Merton tells the story of two unborn twins. These twins were in their mother's womb, talking about the future. One girl said to her sister, "This really is the life. All we have to do is slosh around in this comfy, warm fluid. We've got no real worries, just kicking around, playing with our umbilical chords." And her sister said, "Yeah, this is nice. But I'm looking forward to the next phase of life, too." The first sister was a little surprised. "What do you mean? You really think there's life after birth!? That's craziness. No, this is all there is: swimming in the amniotic fluid, getting the hiccups every once in a while, nothing more." "Oh, I don't agree," her sister said. "I think that there's a whole wonderful future for us, a whole new way of life in a place with freedom, and light, and fresh air." The first sister had nothing to say; she wasn't convinced. And finally, one of those strange contractions pressed in on the twins. They both felt it, and it didn't feel good. The doubting sister said, "Ouch. What's going on? Our perfect little world isn't so perfect anymore." The second sister said, "Don't worry. It's just the beginning of a whole new and better way of life." And the contractions became more frequent and more uncomfortable, until at last, the two were born kicking and screaming into a whole new and vastly more wonderful world. If a baby had a choice whether to be born or stay in the womb, ours would be an exceedingly lonely world.

When that new thing dawns upon you, when its time is right, there's no turning it away. There's a new light shining over your life today. What is it? Time to reopen a door that you closed long ago? Time to revisit an old assumption? Time to rediscover a relationship that you'd given up on? Time to come back to church? Last week (to a relatively small New Year's Day crowd) I made a plea for self-forgiveness. Today I would make a related plea for self-awareness...and maybe even self-acceptance, for surely the hardest place to gain a fresh perspective is into ourselves.

The old sitcom *Seinfeld* is my second favorite TV show of all time, just after *Northern Exposure*. It's strange because, as standup comedians go, I don't find Jerry Seinfeld especially funny. In one episode of *Seinfeld*, the character Elaine borrows her boyfriend's car and discovers that all his radio presets are tuned in to Christian rock and

roll stations. She meets up with her friends George and Jerry, at the coffee shop, and she tells them about it: “I can’t believe it. My boyfriend must be religious.” Jerry says, “Well, it’s a used car; maybe he never changed the presets.” Elaine declares, “Yes, he is lazy.” Jerry continues, “Maybe he didn’t know how to change the presets.” Elaine says, “Yes, he is stupid!” Jerry says, “So you prefer lazy and stupid to religious?” Elaine replies, “Lazy and stupid I understand.”

Much of the world fails to understand the life of faith, and religious practice, simply because they—or we—never bothered to follow that star out away from themselves, past the not-yet-grownup faith of our confirmation classes, past the tired old religious visions of the politicians and the extremists. To many people today, faith looks like a petty, meddling, small-minded business for people who don’t like to think for themselves. And yet, I believe that our post-religious society is more than ready to come home to faith by way of a different road, discovering an ancient faith in a whole new light: faith that builds people up instead of tearing them down, faith that brings people together instead of pulling them apart, faith that lives with questions more than peddling easy answers, faith that cares as much about this world as the next. In the life and history of our world, it’s just...time.

I know this is true because I have a faraway friend who has followed every fad ever conceived by the late 20th century. Move to North Carolina, check! Join a mega-church, check! Put off getting a good job in order to work on his music, check! But he recently informed the world that he’s quitting the mega-church because he thinks life is way more complex than they admit, and he wants to find a church where people struggle with questions and call him by name. An epiphany! It came when the time was right.

Epiphany happens. Sometimes when you’re reading a book, you come across a line that that was written right out of your own life’s experience, and it makes you see everything in a different light. You’ve come home by another road. Perhaps even listening to a musical performance, or hopefully even listening to a sermon, you hear a piece of yourself in it, right there in the work of another person. And there you find yourself gazing back at you, and you think, “Now, how did I get in there?” It’s coming home to a part of yourself that you’ve never seen before, but that something very old inside of you recognizes. It’s like rediscovering a safe place inside your own spirit, a place long-since forgotten.

There is new light for old situations. There is fresh insight for old conundrums. But it can be so scary to step out of your safe observatory, to go from observing the stars to following a strange new one! Epiphanies! They recast your living in a whole different light, and send you home to yourself by way of a different road. There was a time when women could not be elders in our church. There was a time when they could not be ministers. There was a time when even Northern Presbyterians connived at the institution of slavery, but when the time had come, a new light shined! New lights are shining again today, leading us into the ways of God’s just kingdom. Perhaps its time to see your life of faith in a different light; all living things grow and change, even faith. But beware that gut-reaction that tells you to shut out the light! Remember that God’s call is never backward, only forward. And it really is just...time. Amen.