

Friends, as people in my generation are fond to say, “It’s been A. MONTH.”  
 It’s been quite a month for me and my family,  
 because every day since December 2<sup>nd</sup>  
 at least one of the three members of my family  
 plus our child care provider  
 has been sick.

You regulars will remember that I missed a Sunday in mid-December  
 from being sick.

Then our babysitter was down for the count  
 the entire week before Christmas.

So, over the past month,  
 everything about my family’s routine has had to change.

When and if my husband and I could leave for work  
 has depended on how our child was feeling that morning.

Basic schedules flew out the window while the babysitter was out.

What we ate, when we slept, it was all different.

And don’t even ask about the state of the house.

Now, we’ve been lucky through this rash of illness.

I give thanks that my family members are, baseline, healthy people,  
 and that the endless stream of sickness hasn’t been more  
 than viruses and colds,

and that my job (that’s you all) provide my family  
 with good health insurance

so we can visit the doctor.

I have been counting these blessings.

But what this winter’s tough going has helped me realize  
 is how imperative and necessary good health is for daily life.

I have realized that when you or the people around you are not healthy,  
 the already taxing matters of everyday life  
 become even more difficult and burdensome.

This confrontation with added difficulty

has made me think about all the people I minister with as a pastor  
 —people within our community—

who face this health-dependent reality regularly.

After this month, I recognize now, more deeply than ever before,

the burden of facing chronic health problems.  
 I've become aware of the erratic lifestyle  
 of being someone else's caregiver,  
 when you are so dependent on someone else's health  
 and get so little time to yourself.  
 I have experienced how uneasy and unpredictable it is  
 when you don't know how you or the people around you will feel  
 when you wake up in the morning.

Prior to the past month, I was ignorant of all this.  
 Sure, I have done plenty of sitting with caregivers  
     and praying with people with cancer  
     and visiting the very elderly,  
 but I had little view into their daily life.  
 Now, I feel like I've at least cracked the window  
 on what people with chronic health downturns and their caregivers  
 experience.  
 I've gotten a tiny taste of what many people in my pastoral ministry face  
*all the time.*  
 I've drawn closer, in a personal way,  
 to how even some of you hearing this right now live.

Leaving this ignorance has constituted a sort of epiphany, I realize.  
 Epiphany, a word that means "revelation," "unveiling,"  
 a "shining light upon."  
 For me, light has indeed shone upon other people's experiences  
 and illuminated them in a new way.  
 Where I used to *empathize* with chronically unhealthy people,  
 able to *imagine* walking in their shoes,  
 I now can *sympathize* with them,  
 now having shared some common feelings  
 after stepping into those shoes.  
 I can no longer live in complete ignorance,  
 although I'm sure that as my young family returns to its normal,  
 vigorous health,  
 the closeness of this epiphany will wear off.

Overall the journey of shedding this ignorance—it's been a tough one.  
 This journey has brought to light the true burden of long-term sickness,  
 which, for me, used to be in darkness.  
 And I'm still working out how that discovery  
 is a reward.  
 But it's been, one way or another, an epiphany.

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I wonder what it was like for those magi on that first Epiphany,  
 the day we celebrate still today,  
 when those magicians from Persia arrived at the house  
 where the Holy Family was staying in Bethlehem.  
 What was their journey like? What were its arduous parts?  
 What did they learn from it? Did they like what they learned?  
 What was their reward?

In a poem from 1927,<sup>1</sup>  
 the British poet T.S. Eliot imagines the magi's journey  
 and hints at some of the answers to these questions,  
 at least as he envisions them.  
 The poem is told from the perspective of one magi,  
 which when you make it singular is called a magus,  
 who's now in old age and looking back  
 upon the group's journey to Bethlehem.

*A cold coming we had of it,  
 Just the worst time of year  
 For a journey, and such a long journey*

the poem begins, cutting right to the chase. The tone is set: it wasn't easy.  
 The magus goes on to complain about the camels, the snow,  
 the sharp weather.  
 Even in the warmer months,

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1. Eliot, T. S. "Journey of the Magi." *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, Faber & Faber, 1974. From *The Poetry Archive*, <https://poetryarchive.org/poem/journey-magi>. Accessed Jan. 2020.

*There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
and the silken girls bringing sherbet.*

Even the best parts, it seems, beset them with regret.  
Then there were the camel men that ran away,

*And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
and the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.*

Eventually voices start “singing in their ears, saying / That this was all folly.”

This is all life before the magi’s epiphany.  
Complaining about everything,  
monitoring the little things,  
wondering if the difficult trip is worth it.

Finally, the magi arrive.  
They see a valley, three trees, a white horse—  
all images from parts of scripture.  
Perhaps we’re meant to laugh when the magus says  
that they found the place of Jesus’ birth  
“satisfactory.”

Now here’s how the poem ends:

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.

The poem ends with the magi returning home after this  
 “hard and bitter agony”  
 “no longer at ease” because they had seen not only a birth,  
 but also capital-D Death.

Back in their kingdoms,  
 no longer can they tolerate the people around them,  
 who are now “alien.”

Nor can they accept the people’s religious practices that they, the magi, once  
 followed.

As a result of this journey, this lone magus has left ignorance behind.  
 No longer can he ignore the bitterness of the world,  
 the emptiness of their culture’s small-g gods,  
 even Death itself.

A light has illuminated the desolation of it all.  
 In the end, Eliot’s magi experience epiphanies  
 of hardship, sickness, ignorance, and death,  
 and it’s unclear what kind of reward, if any at all,  
 that is.

Now here is where we, as Christians in church  
 celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany today,  
 get to see more than the poem reveals.  
 We know the reward—the end point—  
 of the magi’s epiphanies is Jesus Christ.  
 And hardship, sickness, sin, brokenness, chaos, death  
 are what Christ is born into the world to discover and experience too.  
 “A hard time we had of it” just as easily describes  
 Christ’s journey of life, ministry, and death  
 as it does Eliot’s imagined magi’s journey.

Because in the Incarnation,  
 when God is born in flesh,  
 God gets the personal experience of human suffering  
 through a series of daily epiphanies.  
 Born in Christ, God not only recognizes but literally *experiences*  
 the bitterness of hunger, of rejection.  
 God feels firsthand the agony of feeling inadequate  
 and the chaos of sickness.

God eventually experiences the great divide that is Death.

The Incarnation at Christmas

is the miraculous event

when God gets to know, that is, experience, all aspects  
of being a person.

And Epiphany, then, is the process of discovery

where people get to know God;

when, from the scenes from Christ's life

that we'll contemplate over the next seven weeks,

we enter in

and get to know

this new, shared, incarnate relationship between God and people.

During Epiphany, we discover the intimacies of this relationship

and how it ushers in new possibilities for

mutual understanding, vulnerability, solidarity, and sympathy

between people and God.

Mutual understanding, vulnerability, solidarity, and sympathy:

they are at the heart of every good relationship

and every good epiphany.

Mutual understanding, vulnerability, solidarity, and sympathy:

they are what I was left contemplating

in between nose-wipings and hand-washings this week,

an experience that has rewarded me with getting to know better

some of our most silent and most suffering congregants.

It's an experience of getting-to-know which also produced

this personal of a sermon at the start of Epiphany,

the season that celebrates the most important,

most personal,

mutually understanding,

honest,

sympathetic relationship

between people

and

God.

AMEN.