

Epiphany
Matthew 2: 1-12
January 4, 2009

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA

Adventures in the Land of Unlikeness:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

I suppose each of us has a different entry point to this story, a different place we turn to when trying to relate our lives to those gathered around the cradle,. I suppose each of us has a different gate into this story of God in man made manifest, the defining story of our faith.

For me the entry point is the expectations the wise men held.

This week, as I read and prayed and studied the scripture, I found myself remembering another defining story, another central character, another moment of God made manifest, another case of expectations shattered. I found myself remembering a defining story of Sandia Prep, the school I worked at in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The first month I worked there, I kept hearing bits and pieces of a story that seemed important to everyone around me. The story of a seventh grader. A girl badly burned in a camper fire. A big parents meeting before she entered school. Scars. Frequent surgeries. Whispers here. Murmurs there. Accounts of kids' amazing responses. People giving me history in bits and pieces always tinged with pride and awe.

I found myself wondering how I'd respond when finally I encountered her. Would I avert my eyes? Look away? What feelings would my face betray? My expectations haunted me.

And then one day not long after school had begun, I wandered into the gym. Middle school girls playing volleyball. There was Sage. In the front row. Diving down to get a ball. She hit the ball with what was left of her right hand. And then she laughed with glee as the ball was swallowed by the net.

I'll not soon forget the look that was in her eyes when our eyes met. Her eyes just captured mine and held them in her gaze. And in that moment, the scars, the wounds, the crippled hand just faded away. All I saw was Sage's utter joy and zest for life. An experience that all who knew Sage shared. Caught in her light, we shed our expectations of her and of ourselves as well. As we did, we learned to look beneath the surface. I imagine it comes as no surprise to you, that when time came for her class to elect a prom queen, Sage was chosen. Another expectation shattered.

Sage's story became Prep's defining story. No wonder. It's the story of a community learning to look beneath the surface, a community finding beauty in unexpected places. But it's also the story of a community shifting its very notion of beauty. The people who were privileged to be at Prep with Sage Volkman learned the beauty in the scars themselves. This is a story of expectations shattered and worlds transformed. A great defining story.

One like the story we hear today—the story of Magi, wise men we call them, following a star, seeking to pay homage to the new-born King of the Jews, going to Jerusalem, to the palace of Herod the King—the place they expected to find the baby.

But there was no baby there.

Their expectations shattered, nonetheless, they continue on their way, following the star to Bethlehem where it stops above a one-room home at the end of a narrow alley way. The last place they expected to find the new-born King.

In that simple home, in that small town, away from the center of power, they find a baby born out of wedlock to a teen-age mother and her carpenter husband. The last people they expected to meet at the cradle of the child born King of the Jews.

And yet as they peer into that cradle, as they look into his eyes, as they stand in his light they know that they have met the new-born King, the Christ Child, the Messiah, the Holy One of God.

And in the moment they are changed.

This is the story of expectations held and shattered. The story of wise men—and maybe women too—holding their expectations lightly and letting go when confronted with a change in course.

The remarkable part of the story of the wise men is the way they held their expectations-- lightly. Not grasping, not clutching, not holding tight but lightly. They could let go of them when they were no longer helpful. These wise men were free to meet the Christ child where ever they might find him.

We all have expectations—expectations of ourselves and expectations of others. Expectations of how our lives should go—both as individuals and as a community of faith—and expectations of the world around us. The air is thick with expectations—particularly at this time of year. Where we get in trouble is when we hold our expectations too tightly. When we make of them an idol. When we become convinced that there is one standard of beauty or one kind of good life or one way of encountering God or one shape to a faithful life or one way of being church or one way of being priest.

Remember those wise men. Imagine how different their lives would have been if they had held tight to their expectations and had turned back when they discovered that the new-born King of the Jews was not in Herod's palace. Think of what they would have missed. The defining moment of their lives—an encounter with the Holy One of God.

All of us, all of us find it hard to shed our expectations, hard to step into the unfamiliar, hard to walk in the land of unlikeness yet it is there in the unexpected places and dark corners of our lives that we often encounter God—God of the manger and God of the Cross.

“He is the Way. Follow him through the land of unlikeness. You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

“He is the Truth. Seek him in the kingdom of anxiety; you will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

“He is the Life. Love him in the world of the flesh. And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.” (W. H. Auden, “For the Time Being.”)