

When psychologists and sociologists conduct surveys about the things that cause stress and anxiety across the human spectrum, always at the top of every list are the same 3 or 4 things: moving, the birth or death of a child, and getting a new job. Second to these, and not at all unrelated: chronic or recurring depression, anger, guilt, and low self-esteem. In other words, we could simplify things and just say that the #1 cause of stress and anxiety for us is change. Change of address, change of family, change of job, change in how we feel, change in how we think about ourselves. But we know that change is more than what we think, and more than what we call it. That what we're really talking about when we talk about change is a loss of the familiar.

This being the first Sunday of a new year, it's fitting that we're looking at a story about change—a story in which the familiar is being lost around every turn. Ironically so, the story itself is pretty familiar, or so we've been led to believe. There are 3 kings, who aren't kings at all. They are astrologers. No doubt they are smart, well-educated, wealthy, wise men. But they are not kings. In this story, there are no "we 3 kings of orient are." How we have come to sing about them as kings, I don't know. Maybe it has to do with the fact that they end up serving as emissaries of the king, but they themselves are not kings.

They have spent their lives working the night shift, looking up at the sky. They know how to track the time of day and the seasons of the year by the way the moon casts a shadow over the desert. With just a passing glance they can name every star and constellation. From any point in their backyard, they know which direction to turn to find Orion or Cassiopeia. These guys would never mistake the light of heaven for the tail light of an airplane. Which is how they know on this particular night that something is up. An unfamiliar light has appeared overhead: a star they have never seen before.

Now this isn't just a new road-sign put up by the DPW to announce the creation of rotaries off of 295. Nor is this some banner put up to announce the grand opening of a new Dunkin Donuts. It's not a flashy webpage put up by the government to announce a new healthcare policy or initiative—here today, gone tomorrow. This is a star, the brightest ever. Who put it there? It wasn't the DPW or Dunkin Donuts or the U.S. Congress. The

wise men know this isn't small business. The universe is up to something. A new dawn is about to break. They want to know where it's going to happen.

Now it stands to reason that not everyone would want to know. What do you do when the unfamiliar strikes? According to Matthew, the wise men's first reaction is wonder. "This must be the sign of that new baby we've been hearing so much about," they think. "The one who has been born king of the Jews. A baby who is also king. I wonder where we can find him?"

They go ask King Herod. Surely one king will know where to find another king. But Herod doesn't know, and the thought of a new king, Matthew reports, frightens Herod to death. For Herod, it is the fear of losing power. "My father was king. My father's father was king!" What Herod knows is he is now king, king of the Jews. "What do you mean there's a child who has been born king of the Jews? That can't be! I am king of the Jews!" And king he is—a ruthless, vile, oppressive, tyrannical one.

"A child will know only love and mercy. They can't rule! A child can't be king. I'm king!" This is unfamiliar territory for Herod. Read on in Matthew's gospel and we discover that, so great is Herod's fear of change, he orders all the young boys and babies in the land to be killed.

What do you do when the unfamiliar strikes? Look up in wonder at it, then go in search of its meaning? Cower in fear? Or worse, do you isolate and eliminate?

It's easy, I suppose, to tell ourselves that we know what we'd do. That if faced with the unfamiliar, we wouldn't be unnecessarily protective. We wouldn't judge the unknown, but give it a chance. The fact is, though, we hear so much about change today that it's hard to know what to do. With our 24-hour news cycle giving us instant and constant access to every political message out there, each one sounding different from the one before and yet all of them sounding the same: "We need change, change, change! And I'm going to bring it!" it's hard to know who to trust and which way to turn. I confess, most days I find it easier to turn inward, to isolate, and harder not to fear.

Look closely at the wise men, though, and they don't just tell us there's a better way. They show us a better way. Following the star, they arrive in Bethlehem and finding Jesus, Matthew says, they pay him homage. The original Greek word is *proskuneo*, which gets translated here as homage, but is more commonly translated as "worship." They pay him,

or give him, worship. This is not an unusual word for us. People talk about worship all the time. Where do you worship on Sundays? Oh, I go Four Corners Community Chapel. What's the service like? It's traditional worship—organ, choir, pulpit, you know.

When Matthew uses the word *though*, in reference to the wise men, he's doesn't mean to tell us about the building they're in, whether it has pews or chairs, or a movie screen or hymnals. Rather, he's describing for us what seeing Jesus does to them. It causes them to hit the floor, to go flat on their faces, to supine, to superman, to *proskuneo*. For the wise men, worship isn't a location or a selection of songs or a nice story about Jesus. It's more than this. It's an all-in...full body...experience.

I've been thinking about what it would be like, to lay flat on your face. I bet it looks pretty ridiculous. The thing is, when you're face down you feel immobilized. You can't see what's going on in front of you, behind you, above you. If someone steps on you, you won't know it until it's too late. If someone is approaching, maybe you can hear them, but you can't see them. And some would say that in this position you're at your weakest. In this position, you are most vulnerable, and that's not a good thing. There is, however, an exception. In this position, there is a part of us that is at its strongest. It's the heart. In this position, our heart is most put to the test by having to trust the world around it. By having to trust that the next stranger to come along isn't going to rob me or kick me while I'm down, but maybe help me up. Flat on our faces, unable to see for ourselves, we must let our hearts do the seeing for us. And that means looking for the good in others.

The story goes that when the wise men found Jesus, they laid down before him. Had Herod been there, surely he would also have killed them day. Grown men in fine clothes... laying down before the refugee boy...treating him like the king! Apparently, it was a risk worth their very lives. Then again, Christmas comes every year to remind us that this is the only way God will ever come to us—laid out in a manger. Laid out on a cross. Laid out on a table—This is my body, given for you. There is no pretense here. No charade. Just a God who looks for every possible way to love us. With a love like that, who cares if we look ridiculous?