

Chalking the Doors: Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12

As I was growing up there was a time when I was fascinated by a mezuzah. A mezuzah is a container that is attached to the doorframe of Jewish households. The word mezuzah literally means “doorpost.” It contains a small piece of parchment on which is inscribed the words of the Shema: part of which is “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Jewish households put up mezuzot (the plural of mezuzah) as instructed by the words in Deuteronomy 6:9 telling the people of Israel to be so mindful of these words that, “you shall inscribe them on the doorposts (mezuzot) of your house and on your gates”

“Mezuzah serves two functions: Every time you enter or leave, the mezuzah reminds you that you have a covenant with God; second, the mezuzah serves as a symbol to everyone else that this particular dwelling is constituted as a Jewish household, operating by a special set of rules, rituals, and beliefs.” (myjewishlearning.com)

I was fascinated because, first of all, mezuzot can be very beautiful.

Then I considered what it meant to touch a concrete symbol of one’s faith every time one walked in or out the door, a daily Jewish practice. It would be a physical reminder of the life I am supposed to be living--where my faith was leading me each day.

And then, what did it mean to proclaim one’s faith to the world in this very public way, even risky way considering how Jews have been and continue to be recipients of violence and hatred? Somehow the small gold cross I wore around my neck at that time in my life did not have the same specific tacticality or reminder. There was something about crossing the threshold that made this declaration of faith significant. Could I put one up even though I was Christian? I wondered if there was a Christian mezuzah store.

Today’s scripture is also about crossing thresholds, several in fact. The magi or wise ones come into the country looking for a king. They’ve been watching a star and, seeing its significance, undertake a long journey to find the king the star indicates. These magi were star watchers, highly educated individuals who spent their life trying to read the stars and understand what was happening in the world around them. Whatever they saw in this star, it propelled them to seek out the truth. So they left and travelled abroad crossing boundaries and borders and facing some real risk as the roads of the time were not so safe: bandits and extortioners demanding payment abounded.

Now, we have the magi arriving on Christmas Eve in most of our carols and pageants. Even though they have a perfectly good holy day of their own, Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas which we celebrate this year on its actual day, January 6th. Epiphany is a celebration of light and, for our Orthodox Christian friends, it is when they celebrate Christmas.

But in reality the magi didn’t arrive on the 6th either. They arrived two years, yes, two years later.

They cross the threshold of Herod’s palace, a truly dangerous place, and manage to escape by assuring Herod they would be back. Then as our text tells us, they followed the star to Bethlehem where they entered a house--a house, not a stable, and found Mary and the child.

Here they cross yet another threshold to a life changing reality. A king so far from their imaginations. They were filled with joy, gave gifts, and left to go home by another route, carrying the light and joy with them to new places, new lands, new thresholds to cross.

And that, in the Christian calendar sense, is what Epiphany is about. The light of Christ moving from this one spot in Bethlehem and surrounding hills, to the nations and regions the magi came from. The light spreads out, the joy comes off the magi like contrails as they share the news.

So why is this relevant to you or me or anyone? Whether the magi got there two minutes or two years after Jesus was born, so what?

Well, I think it challenges us to think about thresholds, the ones we cross every day, the expected and unexpected ones, and what we bring with us. Is the light that we proclaimed and sang about so joyfully on Christmas Eve carried with us and borne out by what we do and say? How can we remember our call upon us?

You see eventually I have found my Christian mezuzah, or rather a tradition in Christianity that brings to me the very physical reminder of who I am and whose I am as I cross the threshold of my home out into the world that brings both danger and need and promise.

As United Church of Christ people having quite a Congregationalist bent, we sometimes miss out on the more “high church” for lack of a better word, traditions of our faith. We might deem them “too Catholic” or “too church-y” or “too superstitious.”

But ritual can bring deeper meaning to what we do in everyday life, as well as in worship.

One ritual and tradition is chalking doors. This is an Epiphany tradition practiced for hundreds of years in many parts of the world but less so in the United States, and far less so in churches that are part of the Reformed tradition like the UCC.

In this tradition there is a specific inscription chalked upon the lintel or top part of the doorway. Chalk because it is impermanent. Doorway because it is the threshold, the space between inside and outside, between home and not, between church and the world needing our light.

The numbers for the year 2019, are split in two, and the letters, C, M and B are inscribed in between. Why C, M and B? First off, they stand for “Christus Mansionem Benedicat” which means “May Christ bless this dwelling” in Latin.

A second reason: Do you know the names of the magi who visited Jesus? Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. How do we know the names? From scripture...well, no. And how do we know there were three? From scripture...well, not exactly. There were three gifts but who knows how many magi.

But again, why get nitpicky with a ritual!

What the chalking of the door really means is threefold, a nice trinitarian number.

1. Much like a mezuzah, it marks the house as a Christian home meaning in the truest, deepest, most like the teachings of Jesus way, that all are welcome to our home. That if you knock, we will try to help you however we can. Radical hospitality to all. I will help you as I am trying to follow what Jesus asked me to do.

2. The chalking of doors is seen as a sign of protection, of asking God to bless the household, whether a home or house of worship, and to lean on God's help.

3. And finally, and for me at least, most importantly, the chalk over the door reminds us of what we are called to do when we leave to go out into the world, and when we return to be with our families or communities or even in our solitariness. It says to me, Remember Dear One, that you are going out into a world that needs you. Give it your best. God is with you, Christ told you how to do it. Remember Dear One, that you are going into your home, a home that needs you. Give it your best. God is with you. Christ told you how to do it.

We who gather as Christians profess the way of Jesus, which means seeking the good of all, loving all, even those we frankly don't even like. This has nothing to do with conversion or coercion or even a debate about the Trinity or the humanity or divinity of Jesus. It is about being instruments of love. We are called to bring the light of Christ everywhere we go--into times of celebration and times of loss and grief. We are called to serve the King we worship who tells us that when we feed, clothe, house, visit and sit with the least of these, we are serving Jesus himself.

The chalk is a physical reminder of that. And when our reminder gets worn, when our intentions fail, when we feel bogged down in the long dark days of next December, or the reality of post Christmas bills, Epiphany comes around again bringing light and hope and a new message written in chalk.

May God bless this dwelling. May God bless us all. May God use us to be a blessing to others. Amen.