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Looking for God in the New Year

by Nicole Sotelo

Young Voices

In kindergarten, I toiled over my glitter-laden construction paper stars placed on old popsicle sticks. My classmates and I were going to be the stars in the Christmas pageant and we had a surprise for everyone.

In the weeks leading up to the pageant, our teacher took us to the church and we practiced how to bend low and walk quietly into the aisles of the church. Our parents looked ahead, watching for us to appear on the altar steps. Instead, at our teacher's cue, we rose up among the pews, surprising everyone and called out, "Here we are!"

This week as we near Epiphany, I've been thinking about the stars among the pews and the fact that we, like the wise men of the Epiphany story, sometimes find stars -- and God -- in unexpected places.

I love the story for that reason. The story of those three wise men, or magi, who expected to follow a star to a new king. They first arrive in Jerusalem to find a city rich in its economy and power, but at first they didn't find the ruler for whom they had hoped. Instead, they find King Herod.

I remember that "epiphany" means manifestation or vision of God. The three magi knew King Herod did not meet their expected vision.

A lot of us young adult Catholics have made this same journey, seeking a faith or faith leaders only to find they don't meet our expectations.

In fact, over the last year, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found some startling trends about my peers that made big headlines. The increasing numbers of unaffiliated, those who do not claim a religious affiliation, are concentrated among young adults.

The No. 1 reason young adults cite no religious affiliation, the researchers hypothesized, was that they are turned off by the politics of church officials. Two-thirds of the unaffiliated said religious institutions are too concerned with money and power.

The unaffiliated sound a lot like the wise men: In the search to find something in which they can believe, they stumble upon leaders who too often symbolize wealth, power and politics in what is supposed to be a holy nation, a holy faith.

I can testify to this experience. This last year was one long string of not having my expectations met by church leaders when a priest's pulpit turned into a political rally; when a bishop tried to deny equality to gays and lesbians; when the Vatican issued a mandate against the sisters; and the list goes on.

It's enough for anyone to question their spiritual path. But then Epiphany comes along and I think about the wise men.

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They could have stopped their journey in Jerusalem. They could have used their frankincense, gold and myrrh to buy some nice lodging. Have a solid glass of wine while they laughed about their sophomoric adventure following a star to a king who didn't match their expectations. They could have turned around and gone home. But they didn't.

The star they had been watching kept moving and they resolved to follow it, all the way to the small town of Bethlehem where a poor family would show them a child, where they would find what they had been seeking.

The story of the wise men and the star reminds me each year to find my faith beyond the current king, beyond the politics, beyond the expected. Their story reminds me to look toward the Bethlehem of the church: the people; the marginalized settings; the cracked, unexpected places where God meets me as I am.

This Epiphany, I am reminding myself again to look for God not just on an altar, but among us all. This year, I resolve to follow the star that draws my attention to unexpected places and renews my faith in a God who stands among the people year after year.

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