

This is a picture of my dad on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1985. At this moment, he's the happiest and most peaceful man alive. In his arms, he's holding a tiny, newborn baby—one Penny Lorraine Nelson, his firstborn child.

Like all the most meaningful pictures in our lives, there's a story behind this photo—one that was 30 years in the making. The way my dad tells the story, he says: "I never wanted kids. I didn't like kids. I thought they were loud and smelly and got in the way of having a life". But a few years after my parents were married, they both decided they wanted to try having a child. Nine months later, I arrived. My dad said: "The entire time your mom was pregnant, I was scared out of my mind. I thought: "*what* were we thinking? How can we raise a *kid*?!" But from the first moment he saw me, which this picture captures, he says his heart melted and his whole being opened up. It was like he discovered a new room in his heart that could hold more love than he ever imagined. My mom says that love was so powerful it actually affected the film in the camera, giving us this pinkish-yellow glow that envelops the picture. And while my family tells the story of how love changed the chemistry of the film half-jokingly, there's a part of us that knows it's true. My dad firmly believes he was transformed by a deep love that day, and that love was so deep it changed his life. It didn't matter anymore that he'd been scared out of his mind for 9 months straight, and that he probably still *was* scared, even then. All he knew was that he was opening up to a love inside himself that was *greater than him*—a love that reached out and encompassed his whole family and any baby he's ever seen since, a love that has driven him to work for human rights and ecological justice in the world and in his own backyard because he wants a world where children can grow up in love, joy, hope, and peace. Whether he knew it or not, my dad had been waiting and preparing for 30 years—all his life—for this moment of transformation. But transformation isn't static—he found himself making this trek again, being opened, being transformed by a love greater than himself when my brother Sean was born two years later. And perhaps, for him, his transformations were most clearly manifested in the face and fingers of two newborn children, but it has been a journey he has walked many times before, and many times since.

Today we celebrate the festival of Epiphany in the church calendar. When translated from the Greek, the word "epiphany" means to "make manifest" or "to reveal". The festival of epiphany celebrates the arrival of the magi, or wise men, at Jesus' birth in Matthew's gospel. Contrary to the popular way we tell the story, Jesus was not born with both the group of shepherds *and* three kings who'd followed a star by his side—at least, not in Luke's gospel, and not in Matthew's. When we look at the gospels, there are two different birth narratives—in Luke, Jesus is born in a stable next to an inn in Bethlehem where he and his family are visited by shepherds who come to worship the new Messiah. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is born at *home* in Bethlehem, where Mary and Joseph have lived since they were married, and a *group* of wise men (there's no mention of a particular number) navigate their way to Bethlehem via a bright star to pay homage and offer gifts to the newborn King. No shepherds, no angels, no stable at the inn.

To tell the truth, I have never been partial to Matthew's birth narrative. I like the story where an angel of God appears to a group of dirty, peasant shepherds and tells them that *they* are to be the first to experience the child who will one day set them free into

lives of hope and peace, deep joy and love. I find deep meaning in the belief that God was manifested in Jesus to live with and love .