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January 7, 2018

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On this 12th day of Christmas, we can be challenged by the realization that one theme runs through the nativity stories: Jesus came to the lowly as one of their own. We wax romantic about the stable and swaddling clothes, easily ignoring the very real smell of the shepherds and their sheep and the shocking discomfort portrayed in the story of a homeless couple who had to beg for a safe place for their baby to be born.

Luke's Christmas story can startle us into asking the question: What space and time would we give Christ in our crowded and busy lives? No matter how beautifully we sang "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," the truthful answer to Luke's question usually falls short. Instead of opening our hearts and hearth and inviting Christ in, we have too often been like the folks who keep their doors shut in the Mexican celebration of Las Posadas; they don't want to be mean, but it's just not convenient to open their homes to Mary and Joseph when the poor couple arrives at an odd hour seeking a place to stay.

Matthew's account of the Magi has much to say to First World people who want to celebrate the season of Christmas. Time and fertile imaginations have added exotic details to the saga of pagan astrologers who left their homeland to seek the newly born king of the Jews. When we get down to the bare facts, we'll find that there are not only no camels, but we don't know the names or even how many people were in the group that showed up in Jerusalem.

In spite of all the verses we sing in "We Three Kings," the only words Matthew quotes from the Magi are, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." A short statement, indeed, but those 22 words call to mind ancient prophecies even as they offer hope and challenge to contemporary Christians.

Prophecies, always easier to interpret in hindsight, predicted that the chosen people would become a light to the nations, that a descendant of David would establish an everlasting kingdom, that caravans of camels would come bearing gold and frankincense, that a star would come from Jacob. People of faith see these prophecies fulfilled in the birth and life of Jesus. These prophecies continue to offer the sort of hope we find in Psalm 72: the hope that justice and peace will reign, that the poor will find rescue and that all nations on earth will come to know God. The Magi tell us that if we don't believe that the promises can be fulfilled, we will never notice that it has begun to happen.

The story of the Magi offers a particular witness to First World people today. The Savior came as a lowly one among the lowly and the Magi were wealthy foreigners who paid attention to the signs of their times. Their reading of the heavens

focused on a star that signified something important was happening beyond their borders, and they were willing to displace themselves to discover what it might be. They had enough faith to go seeking more. At the same time, they were humble enough to ask for wisdom from a tradition that was not their own.

The Magi combined their traditions and Jewish wisdom which led to a deeper understanding about God's activity on Earth. Reading their own tradition led them to seek a great king, their open-mindedness allowed them to discover more. When the star led them beyond the great city to a little town, away from wealth to the bosom of a simple family, they believed in their light more than in any preconceived notions about where to find God and greatness. As surprising it must have been to them and Mary, they did homage to a child and gave their treasure to him.

Their star had stopped leading them so an angel appeared in their dreams telling them to go home a different way. While they evaded Herod, the "different way" speaks of the change in them as much as geography. What 22 words might they have used to describe their experience upon return to their own? Did they explain that the journey enlarged their sense of "their own" — their own people, their own perspective, their own faith?

The Magi remind us that the God of the poor and lowly always invites those with abundance to seek more than we have yet found. They invite us to see new things. Whether by following stars or listening to the angels, the Magi remind us to seek God beyond our own preconceptions and expectations, and to always look for God among the poor and lowly.

ISAIAH 60:1-6

This reading can only be fully appreciated by people who have felt displaced and unrecognized. Historically, this proclamation came at the time when the people of Israel were rebuilding the Temple; it functioned as a call to cultivate hope and to remember what it means to be God's chosen people. Some commentators see it as referring to particular historical events while others think it is more directed to an undated future. The Christian use of this passage on the feast of the Epiphany gives it a particular context as prophecy related to Christ.

The prophet was addressing a people who had been in exile and who wondered if their call was still valid. That context prompts us to ask how it speaks to people in a country like the U.S. Even while we recognize the ancient Jews as our ancestors in the faith, we wonder what we have in common with that people. How are we to hear Isaiah's exhortation in our day?

Isaiah called on the people to rise up, to awaken to God's glory. He was telling them that their time of rejoicing was at hand. He announced that their coming vindication had nothing to do with them and what they deserved, but with what God wanted, what God would do in their midst. The prophet was calling them to see God's action in their times. Although they felt they were in darkness, Isaiah told them that the darkness covered others, the nations, those who looked triumphant. According to Isaiah, the very light of God was available to them if they would only wake up to it.

If they had been able to perceive God's presence in their history, Isaiah would not have needed to tell them to wake up to it. Isaiah was asking his people to recognize that God's light was around them, even if they felt they were in darkness. He then went on to promise that when they realized that, when they let God's glory shine through them, the nations would perceive it as well and come to join them in worship. Isaiah was so convinced of his message that he told them "your heart will throb" at the realization of what God does in your midst. That had to be a reflection of his own heart's joy in knowing God's plans.

Isaiah wants the people to understand that as they are called out of exile, God is responding to their deepest longings, the true needs of the human heart. Israel's greatest gift has always been an awareness of who God is for them and what God desires for them. The people in darkness are the ones who are not in touch with their desire for God; they exist in the shadows of a shallow life. When Isaiah calls his people to rise up, he is really telling them to remember who they are and to recognize how God is active among them. Israel's vocation is to let God's light shine, to offer an alternative to the superficiality, to the darkness that surrounds them.

It would seem to us that as the people were being allowed back to their homeland and were being helped to rebuild the Temple, it should not have been so hard for them to see God's work among them. When we read this selection in our day the challenge is all the greater for us because of our style of life. People like us who live in relative comfort and safety too easily mistake our security for what is really our heart's desire. Our very abundance can numb our deeper longings. The

reading invites us to wake up to what God offers, not a return from exile or a rebuilt temple, but the fullness of life.

PSALMS 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13

Psalm 72, a messianic psalm, prays for the coming of a ruler who will be God's faithful representative on Earth. When the psalmist begs for God's judgment, the hope is not so much for one who will punish the guilty as for a ruler who will alleviate the pain of those who have been exploited. While that might sound like two sides of the same coin, the reality is that judgment on the guilty often does nothing significant on behalf of those who have been offended.

On the feast of the Epiphany, we can see this psalm as a prayer that God's own justice may reign on Earth through the rule of the messiah. That means that the people of God will be a light to the nations and that every nation on Earth will be able to see how good it is when a people live according to God's will.

Another dimension of this psalm's application to the feast of the day comes through in each of the verses we sing. They recall what kind of a God we sing to. As the God incarnate in Jesus and the one who led Israel through her long history, this is the God who heals the broken in body and soul, who binds their wounds. At the same time, this is the God of all creation who knows each star, whose might knows no limit. The entire psalm proclaims the praise of the God who reveals that true greatness is revealed in care for the lowly.

EPHESIANS 3:2-3a, 5-6

This reading is obviously chosen to highlight today's feast as one in which Christ is revealed to and accepted by "the nations," even if not fully by the chosen people. The author, most likely a disciple of Paul, assumes that the readers are aware of the relationship of Israel with her God. Israel experienced a long history of learning that there was but one God, Creator of all, who had chosen them as the first witnesses and messengers of God's plan for all of creation.

This people had spent generations learning how to remain true to their faith and to fulfill their vocation to be a light to the nations. When it came to understanding Jesus as Messiah in relation to the Gentiles, the early Christian community had to pass through an immense struggle to recognize that one could be a Christian without becoming a practicing Jew as well.

This selection from the Letter to the Ephesians offers a complement to Matthew's narrative about the Magi. It reminds the community that Christ came for all people and that in him, Gentiles have become coheirs with the chosen people.

MATTHEW 2:1-12

Artists probably have had more influence on our understanding of the story of the Magi than has Matthew the Evangelist. Painters have shown us that there were three kings, one of them often dressed like a Muslim. Many depictions include one black king and some artists have portrayed them as representing youth, adulthood and the elderly. The hymn "We Three Kings," the first widely popular Christmas carol written in the United States, has helped to cement the interpretation of the gifts they brought as gold for Christ as king, incense for his divinity and myrrh as a sign of his future suffering. The notion that their names were Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar began some 500 years or more after the birth of Jesus along with the legend that they came from Persia, India and Babylonia. All of those ideas have their place in popular piety and thus real evangelical worth even though they are not part of Matthew's story.

When we look to Matthew's text, we find none of those details fully corroborated. The assumption that there were three is based only on fact that Matthew named three gifts — offerings which could have come from the hands of two people or a whole caravan which included women and children. Matthew did speak of the Magi in the plural, so we know he intended us to think of more than one person, but he does not indicate what the gifts symbolized nor does he name the visitors or their places of origin except to say that they came from the east.

All of that information leads us to ask what Matthew really does tell us and why. Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy and the angels' message to Joseph. Until Chapter 2 of the Gospel, Matthew hadn't even mentioned where Jesus was born and that news comes in connection with the visit of the Magi. Matthew began by concentrating only on the fact that Jesus was a descendant of Abraham and David. He then only mentions Jesus' birth in connection with the fact that it took place in Bethlehem in the days of King Herod.

Bethlehem had the curious and typically scriptural fame of being a very little place that had great importance because it was the city of the shepherd-king, David. The fact that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod tells historians that it happened before Herod's death in the year 4 B.C.E. That detail also tells social historians and Matthew's first audience that Jesus was born in a terrifying time of history. Jesus, the "king of the Jews" was born during the reign of a ruler so despotic that he had even arranged the murder of his own sons because he thought they were plotting against him. (Some people were known to quip that it was safer to be Herod's son than his son while others pointed out that Herod demonstrated far more interest in saving his throne than his soul.) Matthew's subtle bits of historical information provided the equivalent of ominous background music to the story that was to come.

As Matthew tells the story, when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem they began to talk about the star they had seen and asked around about the newly born king of the Jews. This was Matthew's subtle explanation that the wisdom of the Gentiles goes only so far; the Magi knew that someone important had been born, but they had to turn to the prophecies of the chosen people to understand it more fully. Matthew also uses this story to contrast the religiously open Magi to the leaders of the chosen people who, although they could read the prophecies, exhibited little or no curiosity about the Magi and what their star might portend.

The story goes on with Herod's fearful inquiry about the origins of the Messiah and his request that the Magi inform him of everything they learn. Throughout, Matthew is weaving a story that highlights the contrast between Jesus, the one born as king, and Herod, Rome's paranoid puppet.

Matthew's infancy narrative will end with the holy family's flight into Egypt and eventual return to Galilee. In recounting this story, Matthew has woven a Gospel in miniature. He shows us that Jesus is the legitimate son of David, and more. He foreshadows the conflicts Jesus will have with both Roman and Jewish authorities who collude to defend themselves from the threat he poses to their exercise of power. The story both summarizes the Gospel and brings the Christmas season to a fitting end by reminding us that, like the Magi, we must seek signs of God's activity in our own moment of history.

Planning: Epiphany

By: Lawrence Mick

In most years, the Baptism of the Lord is celebrated on the Sunday after Epiphany. But when Epiphany is celebrated after January 6, as it is this year, the feast of the Baptism is observed on the Monday after Epiphany which falls on January 8.

This might be a good year to remember the Epiphany feast once celebrated three different epiphanies of Jesus Christ: the visit of the Magi, which revealed him to the nations; the baptism in the Jordan, when the Father revealed him as God's servant; and the wedding at Cana, where he performed the first of his miracles in John's Gospel.

Thinking of these three epiphanies together reminds us that the focus of the Epiphany is about much more than a thrilling tale of Magi from the east and Herod's jealousy. It is really a feast to celebrate the truth that Christ came to save the whole world. That might be an especially important reminder in this age when so many people treat immigrants and refugees as less than human. It is especially poignant when we realize that many of the world's refugees today are huddled in the same part of the world where the Magi traversed.

The readings for Epiphany are the same each year, but there are now prayers in the Missal for Vigil Masses on Saturday afternoon or evening. The Ceremonial of Bishops offers several notes for celebrating this solemnity. It calls for "a suitable and increased display of lights," so you might use extra candles this weekend. It also speaks of announcing the moveable feasts of the new liturgical year after the Gospel (maybe after the homily); a chant version of this announcement can be found in the Missal in Appendix 1; check the feast of Epiphany for a reference to the exact page. That setting and a different one from St. Meinrad Abbey can be found online by searching: "singing the announcement of Easter" which may be helpful for cantors and musicians for practice. The announcement is updated each year with the proper dates and is available on www.usccb.org (search moveable feasts).

The Ceremonial of Bishops also suggests a special presentation of the gifts, no doubt linked to the gifts of the Magi; perhaps this would be a good time to invite people to bring up monetary or other gifts for refugees and immigrants. Finally, it notes that “the invitations, comments and homily will explain the full meaning of this day with its ‘three mysteries,’ that is, the adoration of the child by the Magi, the baptism of Christ, and the wedding at Cana” (#240).

These instructions are given to bishops, so they are not mandatory, but they are ways that planners may enhance the feast.

Prayers: Epiphany

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

In this time of increased nationalism, erecting barriers, and labeling others as threats or enemies, this feast calls us to a powerful counter-message. Our field of vision and inclusion must be much larger than that of the status-quo. It must have been shocking to learn that God’s love extended not only to the Gentiles, but to the whole world. It may be equally shocking to realize that our boundaries are also too narrow. This feast is an epiphany about God’s will for Christ’s impact and ours on the world.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were born to a Jewish family in Bethlehem of Judea: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you came for the Jews, the Gentiles, and the whole world: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to open our hearts to all people: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray today for our brothers and sisters across the entire world.

Minister For the church: that it may be a clear sign of inclusion, showing the world that Christ is not only for us, but for all people ... we pray,

- For those who worship God under other names or theological understanding, especially in the Abrahamic tradition ... we pray,
- For loving and compassionate attitudes that open us to people of other races, nations, cultures or beliefs, despite the risks ... we pray,
- For the courage to confront those who practice exclusion because of fear, misunderstanding, a lack of knowledge, or political gain ... we pray,
- For immigrants and refugees who seek safety in foreign lands and long for humane and compassionate care ... we pray,
- For those within this community, in our neighborhoods and beyond, who are overlooked, underappreciated or in any kind of need; and for the ministers and ministries that serve their needs ... we pray,

Presider God of the universe, you sent your beloved Son to show your love to every nation on earth. Give us the same generous love toward others, especially those who are judged unworthy and those we do not understand. Grant us the courage to shine your light beyond barriers and boundaries. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the Light of the world. Amen.

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