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What would happen if a group of Romanian Gypsies or Afghan Muslims showed up at the parish or chancery, announcing that they had come to find the reformer who was about to make our church into what it ought to be? Our answer depends partly on where we position ourselves and how much the current state of affairs benefits, disturbs or disfavors us. No matter our starting point, we might find it a little disconcerting that the visitors, enthusiastic about our change, have come from another culture and faith tradition. Happily, the minute they admit that they got here by following a star, a good number of us would heave a sigh of relief and write them off as migrating citizens from a funny farm.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that when a similar group showed up in Jerusalem around the year 6 B.C.E., King Herod and the religious leaders took them rather seriously. The travelers got their attention by using the “K-word.”

The visitors said they were seeking a newborn whom they called the King of the Jews. Everybody familiar with their Bible stories knows that a king chosen by God can cause the reigning establishment a lot of trouble. So with a great show of religiosity, Herod gathered the theologians to help the pilgrim band understand where the prophets said the savior would be born. As luck would have it, their wandering star coincided with the ancient prophecies, and the Magi soon found the

child and his mother. Recognizing God's presence in him, they offered him homage and gave him gifts that represented their hearts. Then, as sensitive to dreams as to astral signs, they avoided Herod and his kind, went home, never again to appear in Christian history.

What would Matthew want us to take away from this story in his Gospel?

Some elements are easily discernable. One obvious component of the story is that God's presence can be discovered through creation: The star at Jesus' birth was the counterpoint to the darkness that came over the land at his death. It was a sign that although God's light may seem faint, it can never be snuffed out. Then there is the irony that strangers were willing to go to great lengths to encounter Emmanuel, while the religious leaders of the chosen people were content with their theology and a Temple practice they had learned to manage.

The religious leaders of the day had forged an uneasy alliance with their Roman overlords. As long as they didn't make waves, they were allowed to keep the Temple running. Their ritual service gave them a living and did nothing to disturb the peace. Apparently, the priests and scribes had led their people to settle for formalism, counting on the idea that offering the right sacrifices would appease God just as their taxes satisfied Caesar. When the restless Magi appeared and King Herod asked the leaders to explain what their Scriptures foretold about a messiah, the chief priests and scribes could cite chapter and verse, all while remaining complacent, unaffected and incurious. That was their first step toward not only massively missing the point, but also developing a specialty of trying to thwart what God had begun to do through the newborn Jesus.

Today, the story of the Magi combines with our reading from Isaiah to remind us that Emmanuel is still waiting to be discovered in what we might think are the most unlikely places and by the most unlikely people. It is highly improbable that a band of gypsies or a group of Muslims is going to show up at our doors. At the same time, there are serious seekers, contemporary magi, all around us. They are young people who are consciously hungry for a spiritual nourishment that they have not found in our churches and catechisms. They are women, young and old, who feel they have been treated like unwelcome outsiders when they come to the temple to offer their gifts. They are the more than 10 percent of the U.S. population who identify as "former Catholics," not necessarily because they lack faith, but because they have been injured, feel rejected or believe that the church has so betrayed her vocation

that their conscience does not allow them to participate in it. These are the people whose sincere seeking, like that of the Magi, can be a wake-up call to those practicing in the church.

As we begin our new year, today's liturgy urges us to listen to the seekers who want more than they have found in conventional religion. Their searching reminds us that God is bigger than any ritual or tradition and is always waiting to encounter us anew, somewhere beyond our expectations.

## **ISAIAH 60:1-6**

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah is a compilation from at least three authors who assume the same name. "First Isaiah," the original, comprises Chapters 1-39; Chapters 40-55 make up "Deutero-Isaiah;" and Chapters 56-66 are "Trito-Isaiah," from which we hear today. While all three treat some similar themes, they come from distinct historical periods. Trito-Isaiah is the hardest of the three to date because it is more theological and symbolic in orientation and lacks specific references to history. Today's selection offers a promise of salvation that echoes Deutero-Isaiah's Servant Songs.

Chapter 60 begins with a wake-up call to people inhabiting the poverty-stricken ruin of ancient Jerusalem. It promises a 180-degree turnabout from the people's current situation if only the people would open their eyes. It speaks wonderfully to the feast of the Epiphany as a celebration of Christ, God's light shining in the world. The first part of our reading is a call to belief and to the rejoicing that comes from recognizing God's activity in our history. The second part proclaims that God will draw the rest of the world to enjoy the light that was first revealed to Israel.

Isaiah's call is addressed to any people who feel that their world or church has lost touch with God. One might imagine it addressed to the young Francis of Assisi in the collapsing church of San Damiano when he heard the words, "Repair my house!" In our case, Isaiah simply calls out, "Open your eyes! Rise up, for your light is here!"

While we who call ourselves Christian profess that the light of Christ shines in our world, we too often act as if darkness were the world's inescapable reality and the light only a pious illusion. Isaiah does not deny the darkness — in fact, he admits that it shrouds the whole earth. Still he calls us to see its counterpoint. We wouldn't know we were in darkness if we had no glimpse of the light.

Isaiah challenges us to believe that the darkness is neither inevitable nor omnipotent. Yet we need eyes of faith to perceive the Lord's glory shining in the darkness. The only people who can provide the light the nations need today are those who trust God's promise above all else. Now, even more than in the time before Christ, Isaiah charges us to rise up against the darkness and proclaim God's light.

### **PSALM 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13**

This psalm prays that the king will carry out God's will on earth by caring for the poor and needy, establishing justice, and ruling with equity and uprightness. It comes from a people who believed that their king was God's chosen representative and who therefore deserved an awesome amount of respect and obedience.

An early scriptural endorsement of that attitude is Exodus 22:27. It seems to make an astounding comparison as it says, "You shall not despise God, nor curse a leader of your people." Paul sounds as if he affirms that when he says, "Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God" (Romans 13:1). Passages like these appear to put authorities in a class by themselves as stand-ins for God.

One of the harshest and clearest lessons that came from World War II and the Nuremburg trials was that obedience to authority must never override conscience. In the 21st century, even some leaders of the church itself have been exposed as the sort of hypocrites and blind guides whose actions Jesus condemned in his own day. Psalm 72 provides an antidote to unquestionable authority by praying that the king will do the will of God rather than assume that his own will is divine.

On the feast of the Epiphany, we are celebrating the child who, by acting as the inverse of everything generally considered as royal, made all the petitions and dreams of this psalm come true. As we celebrate the king who will be adored by every nation on earth, we may also pray that our national and religious leaders will receive the blessings of judgment and justice the psalm asks for them.

### **EPHESIANS 3:2-3a, 5-6**

As this reading begins, the writer who uses Paul's name claims to have received the "stewardship" of God's grace. The background to this unusual phrase is an image of God as a divine estate owner who has a plan about how to supply everyone under

his or her care with everything they need. According to this image, God appoints Paul as the steward in charge of assuring that all the guests or residents receive what will benefit them. Paul's idea could be summarized as saying, "God has all of this to give you and has sent me to be sure that you can take advantage of it."

Paul is referring to the "mystery" that he received in a revelation. This poses a problem for his fellow Jews because Paul claims that God has fulfilled the ancient promise of a messiah in a most unexpected way. The Greeks' difficulty is similar: The idea that a new religion could replace ancient wisdom awakened a good deal of healthy and resistant skepticism among people who came from a long philosophical tradition. Why should any Greek or Jew see this new revelation as better than what their ancestors had lived by?

Paul deals with that question briefly in the opening of the letter by saying that believers have been sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14). As he develops that idea, it becomes clear that faith in the mystery comes from the experience of grace. Logic and theological reflection may eventually supplement their knowledge, but their living relationship to God through Christ is the basis of everything.

The key to understanding what Paul is saying is to realize that he expects that everyone who hears this letter has enjoyed the graced experience of knowing Christ. Paul presents himself as a steward of the mystery. By extension, all believers share his responsibility to proclaim it. Because of what has been revealed to them, they are all "copartners" in the promise and the task of the Gospel.

## **MATTHEW 2:1-12**

The commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Anchor Yale Bible Series) by W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann does a thorough job of myth-bashing in its treatment of today's Gospel passage. It explains that the text does not actually indicate how many Magi there were and that they were not necessarily astrologers and less likely to have been kings. Those who plow through Raymond Brown's *The Birth of the Messiah* will end up fairly uncertain about how many details of the story might be historically plausible. But in the end, historicity is far from the most important indicator of truth. Because we accept the Gospel of Matthew as part of the canon of Scripture, we assume that it all has value as revelation. Therefore, we look to the story to see what it tells us about our life as a people of God.

Matthew uses this story to introduce themes that he will develop in other ways as his Gospel progresses. He situates Jesus' birth in historical time — specifically, the days of King Herod who achieved great fame for his cruelty. He then describes the band of foreigners who journeyed to the geographical heart of Judaism where they would find the priests and theologians who could help them understand what was happening in their day.

What did they seek in Bethlehem? Their search began when they gazed at the heavens in wonder. They embraced the fact that God's mystery was greater than everything they already knew. Eventually, this led them to search for God's revelation through the chosen people. With evangelical irony, Matthew points out that those who came from afar sought and asked about God's revelation, while those who were near the Scriptures neglected to search out their meaning. Matthew presents the religious leaders as people who could recite prophecies for people who had questions without allowing the Scriptures to question themselves and their lifestyle. We could almost imagine that once the Magi left, some cynics among the leaders enjoyed a good laugh about their naïveté: "Just imagine! Following a star? The Messiah in our midst? Only dumb foreigners would buy the idea that David's old myth would repeat itself!"

In the second stage of their journey, the Magi were overjoyed when the star led them in harmony with the Scriptures: Nature and revelation had coincided. Their physical journey was complete when they encountered the child and mother; they recognized God at home with humanity.

Like the simple people who comprehended Jesus better than the wise (Matthew 11:25), the Magi took the next steps of rejoicing, worshipping and offering the treasures of their heart (6:21). Finally, as attentive to dreams as to Scripture and nature, they understood that reporting to Herod would bring no good. Like the Gerasene man possessed by demons whose story we hear in Mark and Luke, they returned to their own people after encountering Jesus. This, the third stage of their journey, had the potential to last the rest of their lives as they assimilated what meeting the Christ meant for them and their own.

If we want to imagine something beyond what our crèche sets depict, we might think of the Magi as a traveling group of families or friends seeking the meaning of a sign they had perceived in the heavens. As happens to many who come to a land not their own, their presence alarmed some people. The travelers were looking for

the newborn king of the Jews — and according to the religious professionals, none of the right people had an infant who fit the bill.

The Magi's questions disturbed people. As strangers, they didn't understand that they should keep quiet and leave well enough alone. What did they hope to find in Bethlehem of all places? What were they called to?

We might ask the same.

The readings for the feast of the Epiphany invite us to begin this new year by asking with whom in today's Gospel we will decide to identify. Will we choose to settle as a sedentary church, quiet in the face of darkness, contented with the minimal ritual and almsgiving that supposedly fulfill our religious obligations? Or do we want to be more like the Magi, people anxious to be on the move in search of God among us? Isaiah is trying to awaken us to what God holds out as possible for us. Paul tells us that we are to steward this mystery. Matthew holds up the example of the Magi to nudge us out of our cozy corners and into areas where we can encounter Emmanuel, God-with-us, in ever new ways.

## **Planning: The Epiphany of the Lord**

By Lawrence Mick

Epiphany brings heightened attention to the universal or global dimension of the Incarnation. The story of the Magi coming from the East signals the divine intent to include all peoples, not just the Jews, in the plan of salvation. St. Paul makes that explicit in today's second reading: "It was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

That marks a critical change in the early church's understanding of itself, moving from a Jewish sect to a worldwide church, even though "worldwide" then basically meant the lands around the Mediterranean Sea. Theologian Karl Rahner made the point in the last century that the church is now in the midst of a similar shift, recognizing itself as truly a world church rather than one dominated by Europeans.

Many Catholics, however, have not really made that shift, which means they have not fully grown into the name "catholic," which means "universal." Celebrating this

feast gives us an annual reminder of God's intent to save all peoples and of our kinship as brothers and sisters in Christ with people throughout the world. Pope Francis has been trying to help us embrace a more global view of things, as exemplified in his encyclical "Laudato Si", on Care for Our Common Home" and in many of his addresses. The problems of the world today are global problems and solving them requires a global perspective.

Preachers and planners should keep this global view in mind as they prepare homilies and prayer texts and music for this weekend. Some parishes have had three children or adults dressed as kings as part of the entrance procession at Mass. Others, though, include representatives of the various ethnic communities making up the parish take part in the procession or in other visible roles in the liturgy for this feast. If you have a number of language groups in the parish, the petitions might be announced in those various languages, even if that means also repeating them in the dominant language of the assembly.

The readings for this solemnity are the same every year. The Missal now contains a separate set of collect prayers for a vigil Mass Saturday afternoon or evening. The readings are the same as Mass on the day itself.

## **Prayers: The Epiphany of the Lord**

By Joan DeMerchant\_

### **Introduction**

Today's feast is filled with ironies for us. It celebrates those from afar who early acknowledged the Christ child and reminds us of those nearby who were threatened by him. Living in a current political climate that debunks globalism and challenges the meaning of Christianity, we must ask: "How do we make Christ's presence known?" Who do we accept into our communities and our lives regardless of their origins? Christ's coming has always turned things upside down.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you were born in Bethlehem, one small corner of the earth: Lord, have mercy.



- Christ Jesus, you fulfilled God’s promise to be a light for all the nations: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to extend our arms and hearts to all people: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** On this holy feast, we extend our prayer intentions to the ends of the earth.

**Minister** For the church: that it may vigorously embrace and celebrate all cultures and people across the earth, we pray:

- For those nations in the Middle East torn apart by animosity or war, especially Israel and Palestine; and for the conflicts still to be resolved by the major faiths in Jerusalem, we pray:
- For those who do not recognize that God is made manifest in other religious traditions or belief systems; and for all who seek meaning in life, we pray:
- For all who struggle to expand their horizons beyond the familiar and who resist or are afraid to reach out to those of different races, languages, politics, religions or cultures, we pray:
- For the United Nations and other multi-national organizations whose work is dedicated to solving problems and issues that affect our planet and all who live on it, we pray:
- For those in this community who struggle to look beyond our own families, friends, neighbors or neighborhoods; and for the courage to share God’s love beyond our boundaries, we pray:

**Presider** God of all nations, this holy feast calls us to expand our horizons in love to all people, even those who seem radically different. Help us to remember that this message was inherent in Jesus — God coming among us in the form of humanity. May we remember that our faith in Christ urges us onward and outward. In the name of God, the boundless One, we pray.

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