

The feast of the Epiphany is one of seven principal feast days on the Christian calendar. It is also a fixed day—always the twelfth day after Christmas—so that it migrates through the days of the week. This year, it fell on last Thursday, January 6th. In many parts of the world, Epiphany is a bigger holiday than Christmas, with rituals of gift-giving tied to treasure-bearing wise men. In many countries, Epiphany is celebrated with special pastries. In some places, children leave shoes filled with hay outside their homes. The hay is for the camels of the wise men, who leave gifts for the children in the shoes as thanks before resuming their journey to Bethlehem. In Eastern traditions, baptism is common during Epiphany, and houses may be blessed with holy water.

Our reading from Matthew today announces the fulfillment of a prophecy—the prophecy that Simeon delivered in Luke’s gospel when he first set eyes on the infant Jesus in the temple. He proclaims that *“this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.”*

The arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem signals this fulfillment of Simeon’s prophecy. When King Herod hears why they have come, his deadly thoughts are revealed—for a new king of the Jews will be a threat to his own position of power and a threat to his heirs. Herod, who thrives on secrecy and deception, calls the wise men in for a hush-hush type of meeting behind closed doors, and he pretends to be on the same page with them. He tells them that Bethlehem is where they’ll find this new king, and then he makes that “innocent” request: *Go and search diligently for the child,” he says, “and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”*

Yeah right—that's gonna happen—a power-mad, insecure king might go to a little baby and pay him homage. What a guy this Herod is—all the right words come out of his mouth, but cruelty and murder reside in his heart.

Fortunately, the wise men reach their destination, find the child, are overwhelmed with joy and offer their gifts—fit for a real king—and pay him homage. Then they are warned by a dream to return home by another road.

So, what do we make of this story?? The story of the magi ranks right up there in terms of snaring the human imagination. So much has been made of this story about which we know so little. They were not truly kings, of course, and there were not three of them, at least not according to Matthew. We do not know who they were, where they came from, or how many of them there were. We do not know how long it took them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was by the time they got there. We are not even sure about that famous star.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it all in perspective and says: *“It is not that the facts don't matter. It is just that they don't matter as much as the stories do, and stories can be true whether they happen or not. You do not have to do archaeology to find out if they are genuine, or spend years in the library combing ancient texts. There is another way home. You just listen to the story. You let it come to life inside of you, and then you decide on the basis of your own tears or laughter whether the story is true. If you are in any doubt, it is always a good idea to watch other people who have listened to the story—just pay attention to how the story affects them over time. Does it make them more or less human?”*

*Does it open them up or shut them down? Does it increase their capacity for joy?"*

Taylor writes a kind of cool paraphrase of the story and I'll share just a snippet of that with you:

*"It just was not the kind of place they had expected to find a king. A dog was sniffing the woodpile under the eaves in hopes of a mouse. Someone was practicing the lute next door, going over the same phrase again and again. The smell of dinner was still in the air—wheat cakes cooked on a griddle greased with sheep's fat, lentils with lots of garlic and rice. If they had chosen the place themselves they might never have knocked, but the star had chosen it, so they did, and when the door opened the couple inside almost died of fright.*

*Not that the wise men noticed. With their arms full of gifts, they crowded into the small space, bumping their turbans on the rafters. All they could see was the baby, who was not afraid, and whose right eye shone with the same star they had seen before they ever left home. It was he, then, whoever he was. They did not have a clue, but they knew what to do. They got on their knees and worshipped him. Then they gave him the things they had brought him—all the wrong things, they could see now, things he had no use for. They should have brought goat's milk, a warm blanket, something shiny to hang over his crib, only how could they have guessed?*

*The child's parents were gracious. They thanked the foreigners for their gifts and held them up for the baby to see. Then, to the wise men's complete alarm, the child's mother picked him up and handed him around, so that each one of them held that damp, soft, living weight in his arms. Then she took him back and nursed him until they all fell asleep where they sat.*

*In the morning, the wise men could not find their stars anywhere.*

*They looked in all the corners and under the chairs. The baby's mother even shook out his blankets but after an initial panic the wise men said never mind, they did not need them anymore. They had found what they were looking for and they could NOT lose that. As much as they hated to, they guessed they had better be on their way."*

We learn, through the sacred stories and through our very lives—that God's reach of grace and love goes way beyond every obstacle. Obstacles within us....Obstacles outside of us. God's reach of grace is way bigger than we can imagine—it pushes and carries us beyond those troublesome roadblocks.

A great light has dawned, a light that draws all folks and calls us to live our lives illuminated by its truth. Maybe that's what the Epiphany season, the season of light, is all about. We hear the sacred words, the promises in the text from Isaiah—about a light breaking forth for all of us who know what it feels like to “sit in darkness”. May we hear the call to arise and become radiant ourselves with the light of God—to shine with God's love for all.

The early Jewish Christians found and understood Jesus and understood themselves within the context of a long, long story. A story not contained just to Israel...but for all the nations and for all the people of the world.

It is hard to find our so called “small selves” within this grand and glorious scheme—and to connect our own lives within that framework. And granted—some days are way more challenging than others in regard to that. AND we are in the midst of a challenging era with the devastating pandemic.

We want to feel ourselves, strangers from a distant land and far-off time, kneeling with the wise ones from the East, in awe

and joy for the gift before us. And we want to know how God is still at work in this world we live in now. How God is still speaking to us—today—just as God spoke through the prophets long ago, through dreams and angels and a shining star.

And maybe we shouldn't even try to compare our own journey and discernment to such a grand and glorious star in the sky type of experience. Maybe we should concentrate on the "less than grand scale" epiphanies in our own lives—those type of experiences that others may discount as "just a coincidence", but we feel it in our hearts in an entirely different way.

I remember something that happened to me back in 2007. I apologize if I've told this story before..I've been with you in some format for nearly a year....so I forget.

I was driving from Bettendorf, where my partner of 23 years was in hospice care, up to Monticello where my parents lived. My aunt had died and I was rushing up there to take my folks to her visitation in Marion. I was traveling a stretch of county road when I saw something lying in the middle of my lane..as I got closer I could discern it was a dog. I had a lot on my mind...I was running late..and my immediate thought was, "I've got to keep moving, I don't have time for this." Well, my conscience got the best of me, and a mile or so down the road I turned around in a field driveway and returned. It had happened recently, as the dog was still warm, but not alive. As I pushed it to the side of the road, I heard a woman in the nearest farmstead on her porch calling for her dog. I knew...so I pulled into her driveway and told her that her dog was likely up on the highway. We walked up there, she scooped the dog into her arms, and said something like—"Darn dog..has acres of fields to run in and he chooses the highway."

She turned away...thanked me...and I heard something from her like.."They're just like family." I imagine she didn't want me to see her crying! (or she seeing me crying..). It was good that I turned back and was there for her. We needed each other.

William Countryman writes that "there are moments of fulfillment—partial, incomplete, temporary, but yet real—in the here and now. The good news is not just about "Pie in the sky by-and-by."

It is not an escapist tale about a future good that will make up for all our present misfortunes and sufferings. It's about God's enduring love for us, past, present, and future. There are these moments when we sense God intimately present in our lives...moments that sustain and ground our hope. These moments of fulfillment, these small epiphanies—are great gifts when we receive them. And that's exactly what they are—gifts. They are not necessary.They are not inevitable. They are not earned. They are gifts God gives to this person or that—perhaps seeing that they need them in a way that others don't. We may even find openings into the future through a wall that had seemed completely blank."

Maybe those wise, foreign men travelled a long, hard way because they had an inkling of something very important unfolding in a distant land. Maybe something inside them had been restless, or upset, or just plain hungry for understanding. However we tend to classify those sort of things..inklings or epiphanies..may we recognize them as signs of God's love. May these signs, these gifts, these epiphanies, these moments of fulfillment ground our hope and keep us looking forward on the journey—perhaps even going home by an entirely different route!

Thanks be to God!

