

## **Epiphany is all about God with us**

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I spoke on Christmas about how Luke has a great reversal to start off the Christmas story. It is shepherds, the lowest on the social ladder, to whom the angels appear. They are the first to recognize and spread the word about the newborn king. Luke's gospel is all about the last and least being the most important. It is in Luke we hear the Magnificat with its stunning language of a world turned upside down. I said this was quite different than Matthew's account that we hear today and that was true. Matthew's story is all about kings, astrologers, priests, the powerful are the people around which Matthew's story and his gospel is centered

Yet there is a reversal in Matthew's gospel as well. It is outsiders, astrologers, wise men, Magi who come in search of the baby born King of the Jews. I believe it is also important to remember that we totally mix up the story in almost every Christmas pageant ever written since the time of St. Francis who created the first Nativity Scene. The Wise men, more correctly called Magi, did not arrive at the stable. They come to the house as stated in the gospel this morning. We also have a hint that this happens some time later because the Song of Simeon in Luke speaks of Jesus being a light to the Gentiles and the Magi are Gentiles. So they are the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy, which he makes when Jesus is presented at the temple several days after the birth. Many speculate that it may have been as long as two years after Jesus' birth before the Magi arrived.

Magi of this importance would not have traveled alone, They would have had servants etc. accompanying them. Imagine you are Herod and anywhere from three to 12 Magi along with their servants arrive in your court seeking a child born King of the Jews. I doubt anybody in the court was aware of this birth because Herod calls ALL the chief priests and scribes to inquire where the child will be born. They consult scripture and report that according to prophesy the child will be born in Bethlehem. Now King of the Jews was Herod's official title so you can imagine faced with this caravan of Gentiles looking for the new king how upsetting this question might have been to Herod since it was a direct threat to his power. Yet Jesus is not that kind of king.

The magi, come because they are wise, educated men, who read in the sky that something special has happened in the next country. This is not astrology in the same sense that we think of it. They travel to see what great act of God the star signals. They came without any preconceived notions about what they would find other than the star that was the sign of the birth of a leader, probably a king. Regardless of the song we do not know how many kings there were, nor did we know their names until 500 years later when the Venerable Bede the early

church historian declares that there were three and their names were Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior. There are many legends regarding the Magi and the details are not really that important.

While the Magi are somewhat afterthoughts for us, for Christians in the Middle East, especially Iraq and Iran, they are very important. Many of the Eastern religions focus not on Christmas but on Epiphany as the major holiday. Gifts are exchanged on January 6 rather than December 25. However we can get really hung up on the details and miss the bigger picture. All of the stories we hear speak of the in-breaking of God into our little world. An Epiphany is a revelation or in breaking of a deity into our world or a sudden insight into the essential meaning of something often through something commonplace. The birth of Jesus fills that definition very nicely.

The story is not about the kings. We are not called to believe in the three kings or even to believe that they existed at all. I don't think it is really that important to believe in any of the details of the story we hear in Luke and Matthew, but we are called to a deep and crucial belief. That God at that moment in time broke into our world with something unique and powerful.

We as Christians have something absolutely radical to believe in. We are called to believe that God became man in a particular place and in a particular time. God chose to do this not because of Adam and Eve and the doctrine of original sin. That whole story was not part of the early church and was developed into accepted doctrine much later by St. Augustine. No the early church did not believe in original sin.

God did this incredible act because we could not see what was true about God. Richard Rohr said it very well this week. "We cannot *attain* the presence of God because we're *already in* the presence of God. What's absent is awareness."

The people of the first century had successfully put God in a box and called it Solomon's temple. They thought like many people today think that they had this religion thing figured out. They knew what to do and when they did something they shouldn't they knew how to make things right with God by offering the right ritual of sacrifice. They didn't grasp what Fr. Rohr said in that quote.

God always has been and always will be with us, it is our challenge to become aware. That is in part what the incarnation was about. Emmanuel, God with us is the hymn we sang during Advent. This is what Jesus came to show us in the incarnation. Yes to reconcile God and man, but not by blood sacrifice but by incarnation. However we need to remember God is with us all the time even today and we just need to pay attention

## **Companionship**

The only thing that separates us from God, we who seek God, is our awareness in this moment of God's presence. All we need to do is open our eyes to see that wherever we are, we're already standing in God's presence.<sup>1</sup>

-Br. Nicholas Bartoli

We all find our own way to the manger, the house or wherever we encounter Jesus and God. The path is not as important as is the journey that gets us to Christ. We also often forget that the Magi left the house and went home by another way and I suspect just like the shepherds told many people about what they had seen. So the question today is similar to my message on Christmas Eve. What will you do when you walk out of this door today on the last day of Christmas? Because if we encounter God in any form and there is not change no transformation, then we really have not been paying attention. So what do you take away from the manger this morning?

The answer is in a poem I found several years ago.  
The Mood of Christmas by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock

The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart.

Most important I believe that we are called to believe that we can make a difference; that we can do these things, bit by bit, little by little.

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<sup>1</sup> From the word of the day from SSJE on January 3, 2018