

Epiphany

By a happy alignment of the secular and liturgical calendars, the Feast of the Epiphany arrives today – a Sunday – the Lord’s Day. Worship planners like me and Michael have been salivating for months in anticipation of this day.

Over the centuries, Christian poets and musicians have produced some wonderful music and hymns to celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord, and we get to draw from that deep well today. (And if you’re one of those people who complains about singing all five verses of “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” all I can say is, “Suck it up!” We don’t get to do this very often.)

Most years, January 6, the day after the 12th day of Christmas, falls on one of the other six days of the week, and the best we can do is make a passing reference to those mysterious magi who appear in the second chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, waltz into King Herod’s court, scare the daylights out of **“all Jerusalem,”** find the child born **“king of the Jews,”** deposit their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and quietly make their way home by **“by another road.”**

Matthew never mentions them again. Off they go -- eastward, toward the sunrise. We don’t know their names or exactly where they come from, or even how many there are. (We sing of “three kings,” but Matthew doesn’t say there are three. Tradition says “three” because they bring three gifts.

We have several nativity scenes in our home. We put them around the house as Advent begins and keep them up until January 6. Then out comes the tissue paper and the shoe box labeled “creches.” We wrap the three visitors in crinkly tissue paper and put them away with Mary, Joseph, some shepherds and a few sheep – and of course, the baby Jesus. Tidied away and stored in a bin in the garage – until their appearance next Advent.

It’s a shame we pay so little attention to these mysterious visitors because they play a vital role in Matthew’s proclamation of the Good News. You Bible scholars know very well that there is no **“decree from Caesar Augustus”** in Matthew’s Gospel, no mention of an inn, no shepherds, no **“multitude of the**

heavenly hosts” to sing their *glorias* for the birth of the babe wrapped in **“swaddling clothes”** and lying in a manger. Those are the stuff of Luke’s Gospel.

Matthew takes a different approach. He introduces these foreign wisdom seekers as one half of a set of bookends to his Gospel. The other bookend, the one that appears at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, is the so-called “Great Commission,” when the risen Christ commands the church to share the blessings of God in Christ with **“all the world.”**

“Pay attention to these nameless Gentiles,” Matthew is telling us. “They represent **“all the world,”** and they are the precursors to the story I am about to unfold in my Gospel.”

First, consider what a stir these foreigners cause when they show up in King Herod’s court. Naively, they tell Herod they are looking for the child born “king of the Jews.” This is hardly good news to Herod, for he’s supposed to be the “king of the Jews” – or at least one of them.

But Herod plays it cool. After checking with the religious experts, he learns that Bethlehem is the best place to look and tells these nerdy stargazers that he’d like to pay his respects to this newborn king as well. “When you find him, let me know,” he tells the magi. “I’ll come right over to pay him homage.”

Right. Sure, you will.

We all know what’s really on Herod’s mind. He intends to exterminate the competition. Herod is not the first politician to manipulate people of sincere religious conviction, nor is he the last to promise one thing and to do the opposite.

One gets the feeling that these visitors might be “wise” in the interpretation of stars and ancient texts, but so far as the real world goes, they just fell off the turnip truck. Perhaps, after they find the child they’re looking for, they would like to buy some swampland in Florida.

But you get the point. Matthew is hinting that this child whom the magi are hunting will soon be hunted by Herod’s murderous minions. From the moment he is born, Jesus poses a threat to those who don’t want to hear what he will say or accept his authority as God’s own chosen one.

Second, consider the gifts the magi bring. Could the gold be for a king whose kingship is different from that of tyrants like Herod and Caesar? Could the frankincense be for a priest who is himself the offering that brings us closer to God? Could the myrrh portend Jesus' death on the cross and his burial in a borrowed tomb?

Perhaps. Matthew's theme is the hiddenness of God's presence in the person of Jesus. "Epiphany" means "appearance" or "showing forth." Maybe these gifts point to that hidden presence, that epiphany.

Or maybe they're just gifts – expensive gifts brought from a country far away where nobody speaks of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, where people don't worship the way we do or cherish the traditions we cherish. Maybe the point isn't the *gifts*, but the *givers* – these Gentiles who have come to honor the king of Jews.

Remember how, in Matthew's Gospel, that angel appeared to Joseph and told him to go ahead with the marriage to a pregnant Mary? It's all part of God's plan, Matthew tells us. It all fits: **"Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"**

In so many ways, Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. And yet, the way Matthew tells it, God sends these Gentiles, these foreigners, these interlopers, to show us how God is with us in the flesh of Mary's boy. In a sense, these non-Christian magi are the first evangelists of Christ. They "get" the gospel before Matthew has finished telling us the gospel.

I wonder. Might Matthew be hinting that you and I can't dictate to God when and where and how God will reveal God's self? Jesus, the light of the world, shines not only within the walls of the church, but also in the lives of people who are not like us, people who don't speak our language or embrace our traditions. People whom we ignore, or even people whom we fear.

In her reflections on decades of ministry with refugees, Sister Marilyn Lacey writes about "viewing those who are 'other' as *revelation* rather than *threat*." For Sister Marilyn, and many others, Christian mission is not so much about bearing God's light to others as it is about discovering where God's light is already shining –

in a refugee camp, for instance, or in a homeless shelter, or in a prison, or down the street at the Hospice House.

Before we wrap the magi in tissue paper and consign them to irrelevance, maybe we should open ourselves to what those we consider “other” might reveal to us about God’s presence in the world today.

To do that we’d have to swim against the tide, wouldn’t we? We’d have to say “no” to the xenophobia that fuels resentment of refugees and immigrants. We’d have to resist the racism that masquerades as populism. We’d have to reach out to people of other faiths and listen – truly listen – to their experience of God’s presence in their lives. We’d have to acknowledge that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is free – free to shine in expected places, free not to conform to our expectations.

We’d have to say to that king whom the magi honor with their precious gifts, “Jesus, we know you’re the light of the world. Shine in the darkness and draw us to you, wherever you choose to make your epiphany.”

Every year, when Andra and I put away the Christmas decorations, at least one piece accidentally fails to make it into the storage bin. One year it was a sheep without a shepherd. Very Biblical. Last year it was an angel who hung around for 11 months in the living room waiting for her entourage to re-appear.

This year maybe I’ll leave out, on purpose, one of the magi. He can be a reminder that the light of God’s presence shines all year round, but not always where we expect to find it. In other words, the Feast of the Epiphany is a “moveable feast.” Or as the Gospel writer John puts it:

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”