

Epiphany A
2020

Isaiah 60.1-6; Ephesians 3.2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2.1-12

On Saturday evening of last weekend, heading into the local supermarket, just after sundown, in a crystal clear sky, my attention was drawn to the south west horizon and a thin, sharp, brilliant crescent moon joined by Venus, in all her glittering glory – they had the whole sky to themselves at that moment, Venus hovering almost directly above and ever so-slightly to the left of the resting moon. Even if you normally do not look upward at night, you could not help but notice. I overheard shoppers remarking about the sight, a kind of eye-catching post-Christmas celestial ornament, hanging in the early night sky, a wonder to behold. I imagine the magi, gazing upward, in wonder, asking “what glorious message is this?”

The magi (magus) originally referred to a caste of Persian priests, Persia being modern day Iran; maybe they were Zoroastrians; here they appear as astrologers, one of their interests. Where in the east they come from is not clear. “Magi” suggests Persia; astrology suggests Babylonia; the gifts they bring point to Arabia or the Syrian desert*. [note: I composed the preceding about a week ago, and when I reread these descriptions of the magi two days ago, I realized they represented what are modern day nations of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia; in light of the geo political crisis gripping the Middle East and the dangerous military attack by our administration, I wonder, “What would peace on earth look like to this corner of the planet? What would it take to make it happen?”]

In essence, I surmise the magi represent the entire known world of the day, outside of Judaism. In a way, the whole world follows the star to Bethlehem to greet and honor the one who is the Light of the World. And the evangelist’s story makes clear, that this Light shines for all peoples and all nations.

When we meet unnamed characters in the gospel stories, like the magi, we are invited to find our name in them; they are we, you and I, in a real sense.

They were religious seekers. Aren’t we all. The magi were drawn by a mystery greater than themselves; perhaps they were a whole convoy of seekers; they didn’t have the Hebrew Scriptures as a guide; they had their own traditional ways of discovering God through nature and the cosmos; they arrive at Herod’s palace, but the gifts they bear are not for him; the suspicious Herod rallies the religious leaders who tell the magi where to look for the newborn ruler (Bethlehem) but they themselves are not all inquisitive as to what God might be doing in their midst, namely that God could be inviting them, too, beyond their own small parochial world to this great and glorious revelation. The magi look beyond the limits of their own presumptions and allegiances, beyond the limits of even their own traditions and intelligence, so deeply do they seek wisdom that they would follow a star across

the foreboding desert in the darkness of night, to arrive in a foreign land. Haven't we made or may be making such a journey?

The story of the magi in way summarizes the Gospel. The powers of the evil tyrant Herod are vast and frightening. Yet God can thwart and sidestep these powers in amazingly simple and unconventional ways.

The wonderful news is this: God chooses this very world, which we inhabit, our history, our story and breaks into this world and this history speaking a word so fully loving and good and truthful that it takes on humanity and becomes one of us.

And furthermore, God makes a divine decision to form an all-embracing community of love; this is the goal of God's breaking-into and reshaping human history. St. Paul reminds the Christians at Ephesus that the gentiles are heirs with them, members of the body just as they are, and partakers of the promise of Jesus the Messiah.

Epiphany is the great feast of manifestation: God is visible, evident to us, revealed to the whole world as a God who embraces all. That is God's part. Our part is to say "yes" to this, to find our place in this great circle, and to allow divine grace to erupt or just simply flow quietly through our days and our years, as we walk more deeply into companionship with the neighbor and the stranger.

The magi find the one to whom the star points; yet they do not stay; as the evangelist concludes: "they went back to their own country by another route, not merely to avoid Herod, but because a new road awaited a new journey. Theirs was a new horizon and there was no going back.

* Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, The Gospel of Matthew (Sacra Pagina series), Liturgical Press, p. 42