

Epiphany “Lessons from the Magi”

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Every so often, I like to remind parishioners about some common biblical misconceptions. These misconceptions come about due to popular culture, famous artworks depicting scenes from the bible, and so forth. However, if you open your bible, (brace yourself) you will discover in the first chapters of Genesis that we really don't know if it was an apple in the Garden of Eden. We just know it was a fruit. Further, we don't know if it was a whale that swallowed Jonah in that famous story. The bible talks about it as a sea creature. I am a Fr. Killjoy today, aren't I? Further, we don't know whether or not St. Paul fell off of a high horse on the road to Damascus. There is no mention that Paul was riding a horse at all, why not a camel? I think we have Caravaggio to thank for the horse. Finally, to bring my point here home to roost, Matthew doesn't tell us that the Magi were kings. Matthew doesn't even tell us how many Magi there were. We just have the number of gifts that were brought. So, if the magi weren't kings, who were they?

All we can gather from St. Matthew is that the Magi were astrologers. They were strange and exotic foreigners from the east, maybe Zoroastrians. The word “magical” shares the same root as “Magi”. The reason why they are remembered in the Christmas story is because they represent and foreshadow Christ's mission to the Gentiles. You see, the message is, God wants to save everybody, not just Israel. However, lest you slump into despair, there is no reason to fret because Tradition has passed down to us the names of our three Zoroastrian priests/kings and they are Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. In fact, there is a wonderful house blessing associated with Epiphany that you can find on Catholic websites that involves writing something special on your door with chalk. I highly recommend it. You see this blessing on doors throughout southern Germany and can be a wonderful family activity.

Let's go back to our Gospel reading, I can't imagine how these three Magi were ever called wise. The so-called wise men left everything behind! Can you imagine? What is wise about leaving family and country? To follow a star? What is wise about that? This wasn't exactly the most peaceful time to travel to Judea, with the Romans in control and the locals not liking this very much. If you have to do it, I suppose they had the resources, but to follow a star? I bet the people around them thought they were crazy. But something inside of them was moving them. Something inside of them was tugging at them. It probably wasn't very rational. There was a star out there. I have to follow it. They left everything behind. And they were not disappointed with what they found. They were not disappointed with who they found. My friends, this could be one of the most romantic stories in the New Testament: Three adventurers leaving everything behind to follow a star. Of course, whenever important characters show up in the Bible without names, I believe there is an invitation to the reader to step into their shoes, like the man born blind, the woman at the well, etc.

You see, I believe we are all like these Magi. Indeed we are at times just like these Magi. We are all people who at times feel like we are wandering in darkness seeking light. Have you ever felt that way? Wandering in darkness seeking light! The problem is: people have the habit of following the wrong star. There is a hunger in the human heart. There is a God shaped hole in

our heart that we sometimes fill with all the wrong things. There is an ache in the human heart that only God can satisfy. As St. Augustine observed at the beginning of his Confessions, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” The Magi were wandering in darkness seeking light and this was a very dangerous journey. But they followed the brightest star and that gives us a challenge today. No matter what dark valley we find ourselves in, no matter what the headlines bring to us each morning, no matter what worries we entertain in our minds throughout each day, all Christ wants to be is our light in the darkness. Dare we follow him?

And look at the gifts the Magi bring to the baby Jesus. They begin by offering the infant gold. Gold was a kingly gift representing Jesus’ role as the new King David who prophesy said would usher in the new Kingdom of God. The Magi offer Jesus frankincense. The gift of frankincense represents Jesus’ divinity. Jesus is our Messiah because he is also the Son of God and the author of life. The Magi offer Jesus myrrh, a burial ointment. This foreshadows Jesus’ role as Isaiah’s suffering servant who would sacrifice himself for the salvation of all. The story of the Magi also foreshadows the irony the Early Church would come to realize. When the Messiah appears in fulfillment of Hebrew prophesy, his own people would reject him but the gentile nations would be the first to embrace him.

It is this reality that underscores how the Magi also gave the baby Jesus a fourth gift, more precious than gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is a gift that was already given the day they decided to follow the star. The Magi offer to Jesus the gift of faith. Indeed, it is in the mystery of Epiphany that we see clearly how the crib we celebrate at Christmas points directly to our faith in the cross at Good Friday which points directly to our faith in the empty tomb on Easter Morning. Jesus’ empty tomb points directly to our empty tombs at the end of time, expanding the opportunity of membership into the Chosen People to include the entire human race. You see, the celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany lose much of their meaning without the Pascal Mystery. In fact, they lose all their meaning. The Magi’s pilgrimage makes little sense without faith and hope in the resurrection and the opportunity of salvation for the whole world.

My friends, what are the areas in our lives that are dark and bleak right now? What are the areas in our lives where we stumble in the darkness seeking light? We are invited this Epiphany to take a lesson or two from the the Magi, recognizing that we wander in darkness in so many areas of our lives seeking the light of Christ. Once we have found that light, something remarkable can happen. For one, Christ can shine a light on the path we should walk as we enter a new year. However, Jesus can also shine through us to the people around us by the witness of our faith.