

Epiphany Sunday C January 6, 2018

The Gifts of the Magi

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It seems they could have done better, doesn't it? I mean with the gifts those wise men gave to the newly born Jesus. I'm not the first person to ask, what is a baby going to do with stuff like frankincense, and myrrh. Gold, sure, the family was poor so that gold would come in handy, but who knows what those other things even are? This time of the year, social media and other news outlets are full of memes and cartoons that poke fun of the three gifts of the magi mentioned in Matthew's Gospel this morning, several insist that if only the gender of the magi had been different they would have showed up at the same time as the shepherds and angels from Luke's Gospel and would have brought much more appropriate and practical gifts for the baby of a poor couple far from home: diapers and casseroles and such. American short story writer William Sydney Porter, writing under the pseudonym O. Henry penned a lovely story that also pokes gentle fun at gifts of the magi, by comparing them to those of a couple who gave up their great treasures to purchase gifts for each other; the punchline being the gifts could only be used with the treasure they sold, making the gifts generous gestures but completely useless.

Those gifts of the wise men are one of the things we tend to notice in the extraordinary Gospel reading this morning. Perhaps to some of you, this reading feels more like a good one for Christmas with the giving of those gifts than some of the readings we heard during the season of Christmas that ended yesterday. Today is the first day of a new season for the Church, today we celebrate the visit of the wise men, the day the church calls The Epiphany. And while it is hard to ignore the part about the wise men presenting baby Jesus and his mother with what seem like impractical, ridiculous, and ostentatious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, perhaps there is a lot more to this story and maybe there are other gifts in it, gifts easy to miss when we play judge about the appropriateness of metal and incense, maybe there are even deeper gifts for us in this Gospel, gifts that may seem impractical, ridiculous, and ostentatious, but are in truth the Good News of Great Joy the world needs more than anything that can be consumed like so many gifts of the season.

Good news like the gift of hope. Scholars and historians write that the time when Jesus was born was not one of harmony or happiness for most human beings on the planet. Some have called it a time of “aching despair”, not just for Jewish people but all people, when no one had much hope for the future. Greek writers of the time wrote it was so hopeless the world was near its end. And while there was a sense of expectation, of a coming change with the arrival of the Messiah for both Jews and non-Jews, there was also an impending sense of doom and hopelessness.

In those days there were what our translation calls wise men, but the original language calls magi. It’s a weird word and there has been some controversy by scholars and commentators around who exactly these wise men or magi were. Some say there were foreign scholars, men who studied the stars and any and all ancient texts. Others believe they were astronomers, others insist they were not as scientific as we define scientists in the 21st century. These folks insist the magi were magic men, astrologers who were attuned the conditions on earth and the movement of the stars and believed you could look to the heavens for understanding about the troubling or joyful things that happen to those of us who live beneath the stars. Let’s say they were different from most of the people we find in the Gospels. They were foreigners, outsiders, who in days of despair dared to hope that the stuff they had read in old Hebrew Scriptures about the coming of a messiah who would free not just Jews but all people from the oppression of the power-greedy, corrupt, and cruel who seemed to always be ruling over them. These outsiders who had the fortitude to believe words written so long ago would manifest in reality and kept looking to the stars for the sign that things were about to change can teach us a lot about hope.

Notice what the magi, even though they were not Jewish, nor were they Christian, they were good pagans – as my pagan friends would say – put their hope in. They did not believe the star they had been waiting for was a manifestation of a new government, or a new technology, or a new consumable. It was a new king. It is possible even they didn’t quite understand what kind of king they were putting such hope in without undertaking the journey to see that king for themselves. The king born under a star that for them, and for the author of Matthew’s Gospel represented the hope of salvation and world renewal for Jewish and pagan people. That star was a bright shining combination of all people’s hopes.

When what they had dared to hope for appeared, the magi show us another gift, the gift of perseverance. It wasn't enough to wait and hope and watch. The star was an invitation to change, to participate in the liberating change the messiah was going to bring. So they did what people of faith like Abraham have always done: they left of the comfort of their homes, their own countries, taking risks we probably can't imagine, being strangers in land they would undoubtedly have found strange, to be vulnerable travelers in days before safe waysides, comfortable 4 star hotels, GPS, cell phones and on-line reservations. All to accept the Divine's Invitation to be part of God's Incarnation, to see what it means that God came to dwell with us on earth, to be present with us in the midst of hopelessness, and to show us how to live free from oppression even as Jesus freed us from the oppression of sin.

Such freedom is not necessarily the hope for all people. And other gift of the magi in today's Gospel is how they showed us that what some long for, others dread and will do all in their power to stop. I am referring to the episode with Herod, the man who had the official title King of the Jews, because he was given that territory by the Roman Empire, the government that had the military and political power of the day. Most of us are pretty sure we know about King Herod. He's a bad guy. Although he was the guy who built the Jewish temple, and he would sometimes melt down his gold ornaments in order to provide funds to feed the poor people under his rule, he was always paranoid of losing his throne and his power. Historians tell us he is responsible for the deaths of his wife, his mother-in-law, and three of his sons, just so they would not usurp his throne. Herod was no stranger to fear, so when the strange magi showed up in Jerusalem looking for a new king of the Jews, it's not hard to imagine how that made Herod feel.

Some folks wonder about the wisdom of the wise men showing up in the wrong city: Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem. Maybe being outsiders, they thought it prudent to let the local authority know what they were up to. Maybe being outsiders, they were unaware of what modern historians now know. Maybe being outsiders, they needed help understanding the scriptures that were not part of their religion. Maybe they assumed a king would be found in the place of kings: a palace. Maybe, they needed to learn what kind of king they were seeking. Maybe they needed to learn what they had put their hopes in, salvation

and renewal would not come from any empire, even one as powerful as Rome. For all they found in the palace was fear and corruption in response to their presence.

I find it fascinating that it was outsiders, strangers, who noticed the star, and the chief priests and scribes the magi consulted did not. They had no idea it was shining brightly above them. And when they learned it had appeared, they responded just as King Herod: with fear. No curiosity. No desire to join the strange magi on their journey. These religious elite responded to the news that what they were supposed to have been waiting for had finally appeared with fear. Perhaps because they had long since stopped putting their hopes in God and instead saw wisdom in siding with the status quo, the ruling class, the power of the Roman Empire. The shining of the star was no light in the darkness for them, just like the presence of God Incarnate, of Jesus, was not something they ever came to embrace, a joy they never knew even though he was in their midst, throughout the Gospels.

Joy is another of the gifts of the magi. We heard in the Gospel lesson when the magi finally saw the star stop, they were overwhelmed with joy. It's important to remember joy is not a sense of happiness, although joy might have a bit of happiness in it at times. Joy is deeper than happiness. Joy is connection with the Holy, with something larger and more real and more loving than ourselves. That is what the magi felt as soon as the star stopped, even before they saw Jesus. And what a meeting that must have been for them. After being in the presence of King Herod's fear and corruption, they found themselves with God Present, with the Incarnation, the true king. And perhaps that is when they received the gift of understanding what kind of king they had been seeking. Not the kind that is league with emperors, not the kind who cares about power, but the king who cares about the people the powerful take advantage of. A king whose love is liberation from oppression.

It must have been a powerful encounter because the magi then give us one last extraordinary and ridiculous gift when they returned to their country by another road. They show that once they had truly received the love of their king, they couldn't live the way they had before. Things changed.

Now that Christmas is over, I often hear people say things can get back to normal. But that is not what happened for those strange wise men. They no longer felt they needed to obey the powers of the land and listened to their dreams instead of those in power. Perhaps the real gift of the wise men is not

gold or frankincense or myrrh. Perhaps the gift of the wise men is learning to accept the gift of transformation, being willing to change. That it is not enough to hope in something or someone outside of ourselves to make the world the way we want it to be. The gift of the wise men is that encountering Christ, whether during the Christmas season or another time, is being willing to change, to let God change us, and then live that change every day, not so we can make the world the way we want it to be, but so we can help make God's love known to the world.

Perhaps such a transformation might manifest itself in practical consumables like diapers and casseroles at times. But more often it will most likely appear impractical, ridiculous, ostentatious, or strange, like those strange magi who dared to hope, to persevere in that hope, who refused to participate in fear, who accept joy, and let that joy of God's love Incarnate here on earth transform them so the way to their own country, their way home looked more like the transformation they found. Now that Christmas is over, and a new season is beginning, perhaps the transformative gifts of Epiphany will help us all find such a way home.