

The Epiphany 2021 January 6th Year C

Today we celebrate the coming of the Wise Men to the cradle in Bethlehem to pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews. Because they follow the Julian calendar, the Russian and Serbian Churches celebrate the Theophany (Manifestation of God) on January 7th.

In the Western Church we emphasize Jesus Nativity. The Eastern Church emphasizes his baptism.

According to the Interpreter's Bible; the theme of the section of Isaiah is expressed in Isaiah 40:5 "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it".

In the previous chapters of Isaiah the manifestation of the glory of the Lord brings judgement and redemption. The times: are dark and discouraging. In the middle of all this gloom the glory of the Lord will be manifested in Jerusalem. Isaiah says "The Lord will rise upon you and his glory will appear over you". The people of God are called to rise and shine.

The glory of the Lord and his people will be that the nations will come to Jerusalem. Kings will come to the brightness of their dawn. God's people will be reunited with their children who will come from afar and the wealth of the nations will come to them.

Listen to how the wealth of the nations will come. It will be brought by camel caravan from Midian and Sheba. The Gentiles will come to Jerusalem bringing gold and frankincense and proclaiming the Praise of the Lord. At the redemption of Israel, both Jews and Gentiles will praise God.

We are living in dark and discouraging times: pandemic, political and social distress, unemployment, economic crises, and deep social division. Where are we to find the light of God in all this?

In the courage, dedication and self-sacrifice of nurses, doctors and essential workers. In the unexpected generosity of others. In the technological ability for outreach and the church beyond the walls. In the kindness of strangers. And in the presence of God in our hearts. Most of us have lived through dark times in our lives. How did God's light break through the darkness for you?

In the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks about receiving a commission of God's grace for the Gentiles.

On the Road to Damascus, Paul was confronted by, blinded by a powerful light and had an epiphany. A mystery that was hidden for ages was revealed to him by God.

In former generations salvation was only for the people of Israel. Even Jesus believed that he was only sent to the lost tribes of Israel. It was revealed to Paul that to quote him "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel". More than that this inclusion of the Gentiles is according to the eternal purposes of God.

God's mercy and grace are not just for Israel but for all humankind. God's love is universal. Paul was a transmitter of grace.

The Religious is a school of inclusion. We would probably never on our own, have chosen to live with this particular group of women. We are made one in Jesus Christ whose love is big enough to encompass us all. Can we continue to be open to God's inclusiveness?

Our Gospel reading for today is from Saint Matthew. It's the story of the seeking for and finding of the infant Jesus by Sages from the East.

First it's interesting to compare this story with Isaiah's prophecy of the redemption of Israel which we read earlier. The Magi follow a great light from God, in their case a star. They come from a Gentile country a long distance away. The gifts they offer to Jesus include gold and frankincense. Notice that they are not called Kings and we are also not told how many there were. These details were added centuries before.

So who were the Magi? Herodotus, the historian, says they were originally a Median tribe. The Medes were part of the Persian Empire. They became a tribe of priests like the Levites In Israel.

According to Barclay they were men of holiness and wisdom. They were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural sciences. They were probably astrologers as well. There is much speculation about the "star". Was it an unusual conjunction of planets or constellations? We don't know. What we do know is that they made a long and dangerous journey to find and honor the newborn King of the Jews predicted by the stars.

Where do you go to find a king? Why, go to a Royal palace of course. So the Magi go to King Herod to ask for directions. Herod was half Jewish and half Idumaen. He curried favor with the Romans by suppressing uprisings in Palestine. He was appointed governor in 47BCE. The Romans gave him the title of King in 40BCE. He ruled until 4BCE. He built the Temple in Jerusalem.

But there was another side to Herod. His throne was insecure as his kingship depended on the Romans. As he grew older, he became suspicious that people might be plotting to take his throne. If he suspected that a person was a threat to his throne, he had them murdered. He murdered his wife and her mother and also three of his sons.

Can you imagine Herod's reaction when the Magi told him they were searching for the newborn King of the Jews? Herod was alarmed and the whole city with him. He called in the professionals – the scribes. They searched the scriptures and found a passage in the Prophet Micah saying that one who is to be ruler in Israel would come forth from Bethlehem – David's City. Herod asked the Wise Men to search diligently for the child and when they have found him to come back and tell Herod his location so that he may also worship him. Fortunately, God had other plans. After the Magi had done homage to Jesus and offered their gifts, an angel appeared to them in a dream. The Angel told them not to return to Herod so they went home by a different route leaving Herod to stew in his own juices.

So what do the Magi have to teach us? They left everything to follow a compelling vision (the star). What star are we following? What have we left behind in order to seek God? Many of us have had a long and arduous journey. What detours have we encountered? How has our journey changed us? The Magi brought their gifts to Jesus. What gifts do I bring? May our journeys to Jesus be as fruitful as theirs.