

Epiphany - C

There are a lot of traditions that have emerged around Epiphany. Scripture actually does not provide all that much information about the “wise men from the East.”

It doesn't for example, say that there were three of them, but tradition has filled in a lot of the gaps in the story, and today we simply accept that there were three wise men and even that their names were Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior.

A further foray into the tradition uncovers the item that one came from India, one from Persia, and one from Arabia, perhaps because all those countries were known for a strong tradition of astronomical observation.

The point that Matthew wants to make with the arrival of the magi, however, is already presented in today's first reading:

“Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance.... the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you and the wealth of the nations shall be brought to you.”

What we celebrate at Epiphany, as much as anything, is that God's salvation is designed for everyone, and that reality is made manifest to the nations, even if God's chosen people are not willing to cooperate.

Even the stars in the heavens cannot keep quiet about it!

There's a great deal of irony in the story, as the wise men arrive at Herod's palace asking about the newborn king. Herod and his courtiers have no idea what they are talking about.

Not only that. Upon hearing the news Herod can only think of it as a threat to his power. He begins to plot for Jesus' removal.

Reflecting on this story confronts me in a couple of ways:

1) First of all, I'm forced to acknowledge that the thing that draws the wise men together is not a common language or heritage or even their interest in the stars, but simply the desire to see the one proclaimed by a new star in the heavens.

India and Arabia are quite different culturally, but the wise men put aside their differences in order to travel together and fulfill their common quest.

In light of that, I have to check myself and see to what extent I have wrapped up my proclamation of the Good News in cultural baggage that just makes it harder to hear for people who don't share my background.

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2) Herod and the chief priests and all the scribes of the were all in a privileged position to welcome the newborn king of the Jews.

But somehow their tradition and the words of the prophets did them no good. They had become blind and deaf to it

Still, the proclamation went out—under other means. God still had other avenues, in this case the heavens themselves, to use as tools to proclaim the Good News.

The story shows how little control Herod really has over the situation. I find myself in a similar circumstance.

Because of my own lack of conversion, I too often find myself on the wrong side of things, discovering too late the truth that is so apparent to others, whether they have a church tradition or not, about what God is doing in the world.

I think that's really the genius of Pope Francis's pontificate. He has simply stepped away from the culture and trappings of the Roman Curia, and proclaimed the gospel in its simplicity and immediacy.

Francis keeps reminding us that it's not about who is in and who is out; the message is always first and foremost about God's universal and enduring mercy. That's what we have to be

proclaiming, by words and even more so by our actions.

In a society which seems to be hardening more and more into opposing camps—those who watch Fox News, for example, versus those who watch MSNBC, the message of today's gospel can confront all of us, and force us to look at the extent to which we have fallen prey to the temptation to wall ourselves off from what God wants to do, accepting his salvation for us, but refusing to entertain the idea that he could be working in the lives of others as well.

Herod shows us where this line of thinking ultimately leads.

The wise men overcame the things that made them different and let themselves be led by the thing they had in common: God wanted them all to experience the grace of being in his presence, without any precondition, really, except for the desire to know him.

Today we pray for eyes that can read the signs of the times that we may know and understand the proclamation God still lets go out to all the earth. And upon hearing it, to drop what doesn't matter, and set off on our own quest to discover the grace of God present among us.