

January 11, 2009

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

The first epiphany traditionally has been the finding of the Christ child by the three wise men, or the three kings. For quite some time they had discerned indications of his arrival by studying the stars.

After all this anticipation and study, they finally found the child in Bethlehem. It was an epiphany, the first epiphany.

It is therefore linked to the birth of Jesus and to the response and worship of people. Originally the celebration of Epiphany included three elements: the Baptism of Jesus, the first miracle of Cana of Galilee, where the water was turned to wine, and the visit of the three kings. And in the next two weeks, those events will be part of our Epiphany experience via the readings.

In the early church a celebration of the birth of Christ plus these three events ideally performed the Epiphany function of manifesting the full glory of Christ to the world. Christmas celebrates the humanity of Jesus. In his birth we see he really was born of a woman. In Epiphany, through the celebration of his Baptism, we see his relationship with the Father. Both Christmas and Epiphany taken together attest to the fact that Jesus was divine and human at birth. Epiphany celebrations began in the second century. In fact, the celebration of Epiphany is older than the celebration of December 25.

So we can see that the early church was focused, not just on a Christmas celebration, but on a Christmas-Epiphany celebration where Jesus' birth, couple with the account of his Baptism, the miracle at Cana, and the visit of the three Kings put forth Jesus as human and divine simultaneously.

Perhaps we can further appreciate this when we realize that the human-divine nature of Jesus was not just a lofty theological idea. But it was a reality that was meant to be celebrated just like Christmas and Easter.

In my own study of the epiphanies around Jesus Christ, I find a powerful element of magic that is part and parcel of all the epiphanies. Do you recall when Jesus came to the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, walking on the water? When they were frightened, he said, "Don't be afraid. It's me." And in that occurrence Peter, James, and John knew that it was Jesus. They knew that he was their friend, their teacher. But there was also his walking on the water, something magical. When he was transfigured in the blinding light before his followers, they knew it was him. But they also knew that he appeared in a blinding light. Something magical. And so this Jesus was someone to walk with, someone to listen to, someone to eat with. But he could also change water into wine. And once he fed five thousand people using a few loaves of bread and some fish. And when he called for a dead man, Lazarus, to come out of the tomb, he did. We could say that those concerns about friend and person of magic are relegated to the first century, because that is when Jesus Christ appeared in physical form.

But, if Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist. If we sense his presence in the Word of God, then those questions are our questions too. And they are Epiphany questions. Because they are about friendship and relationship. And they are about magic.

I think it is hard for people, hard for us to put all of that together. Hard to realize that the Jesus in the Eucharist is the same Jesus the three Kings found beneath the star, the same Jesus who has been known as a friend to many. The same Jesus who has been known as a magical person to many.

Many times, in our hurried 21st century lives, we do not give ourselves a chance to experience a fuller impact of Jesus because we want it like fast food. We want it now. And I think it is rare, or even non-existent, when Jesus appears as the result of a fast food demand. But with a consistent focus, over hours and days, that could be a focus on the scripture, a focus in prayer, or a focus in thought, there is always a reward.

I did not really expect much from my wife this Christmas in the way of a gift. Because she had hip surgery on December 9. So I figured she would be too busy recuperating to consider much of a gift.

So, I was ready to do one of those things that spouses do, when they are at their best. I was ready to give her a break. I was ready to be very grateful for whatever she gave me. She got me an ancient coins kit from National Geographic. In the kit are five ancient Roman coins that are around 1500 years old.

The coins are covered in mineral deposits from being buried for hundreds of years. But also in the kit are chemicals and brushes used to clean those coins, and access to information on line that will help me identify the coins. I cannot tell you how much I have enjoyed cleaning up these coins. It is a slow process, that will take weeks or months. It requires soaking in olive oil and periodic brushing and rinsing. But slowly the details of the coins are coming out. I have a coin that I now know came from the time of the emperor Constantine and one from the time of the emperor Valentinian.

The only other experience I would liken it to is immersing myself in a certain scripture over days or weeks. Slowly, as I think, as I pray, the truth of the passage comes to light in my mind.

And there is a reward for consistent focus and patience.

If we were to have a consistent focus on the meanings of Epiphany, we might ask, "What is it like to have such a friend as Jesus? What is it like to know the Son of God? What is it like to know him in his love? What is it like to know him in his magic? One thing that comes out of the New Testament is that there is nothing to fear about the epiphanies of Jesus. In almost every instance he says, "Do not be afraid." Rather these experiences seem to be for our appreciation and benefit.

The question that is begged then is, Do we allow for epiphanies in our own lives? Do we allow for an appreciation of them? Do we allow for that benefit? We could say that some of the most moving and inspiring of our worship services here could be called epiphanies. Or we could say that the ones that are less inspiring could be epiphanies on a lesser scale. Suppose we did allow for epiphanies in our lives.

Suppose we did allow for magic. Would we allow that our lives in the church area also about epiphanies that happen in every day life? Would we allow that our lives in Christ are also about magic?

There have been times when I was at a bookstore or a library when I accidentally knocked a book off the shelf. When I picked it up, I saw it was about something I had been wondering about. An epiphany? Have you ever had such a thing to happen? Sometimes these seeming coincidences are called synchronicities.

But as I said before, in our lives in Christ, the celebration of Epiphany is not just about the celebration of magic or extraordinary occurrences. The disciples witnessing of the epiphanies around Jesus was always coupled with their living with him, talking with him, eating with him, laughing with him. So, along with a magical event to take in, there was a person to know.

If, in your own personal devotion, you consistently prayed that God would help you be more aware of epiphanies in your life, what difference would that make? If, in your personal devotion, you prayed for help in knowing God better, what difference would that make? If you prayed for both, for increased relationship with God and for more awareness of epiphanies, what difference would that make? If you talked with friends here at church about such things, what difference would that make?

For all of us there is a vast frontier that fits into the shape of our lives that has to do with knowing God as a friend and appreciating who God is in our lives, and opening to door to ho God will be in our lives.

It really has nothing to do with routine and mundane. It has to do with leaving yourself open to the unexpected, to that which cannot be explained, to the adventure. The three Kings never had Jesus' resume before they met him. They just had a star to follow and a desire.

May we follow that star in our hearts. And may we have courage to let him appear in our lives as never before. Amen.