

Epiphany of the Lord, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-3a,5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

The celebration of Christmas is completed today with the feast of the Epiphany. One of the things I think is so interesting about the whole way in which we celebrate the coming of Christ is that the entrance into the world of the Christ figure is marked by Jesus lying in a manger. His parents are on either side of him, with animals all around. Jesus is actually in a food trough. This is a beautiful image of the food Jesus is going to be for all of us. The element that surrounds this whole event is a wonderful sense of peace. I think of all the Christmas songs that I use at liturgy, the one that seems to especially ignite something at Midnight Mass, is that wonderful image of a silent, quiet, peaceful night when we recognize that everything is going to be okay. What is the heart of this source of peace for us? If we look at the way the world is, it doesn't take but a few moments to pick up the newspaper in the morning and realize that we do not have a world free of violence or from things that cause anxiety. It's anything but a peaceful world. Even 2,000 years after the coming of Christ, even though we struggle and work and try to bring people into a greater awareness of what brings life, there is still violence. There is still conflict. Where does the peace come from? Obviously, it doesn't come from being in an environment where there is an absence of conflict.

This mysterious peace that is our inheritance comes from an awareness of what is. The awareness of what is, that level of consciousness we are invited to embrace particularly at this time of year, is that this God of ours has broken a limitation. This limitation is what I would call a lack of awareness. It is a lack of sensitivity to who God really is. He has broken into that kind of darkness of a sense of God being distant and far away, of the world not really being in his hands, and things being awful. He breaks through all of those normal and conventional ways of seeing the world and says, "Look. I am here. And I have come to say something that is so incredibly important. I would like to partner with you. I would like to be with you and show you things. I want to open your eyes to see that there is meaning, purpose, direction in all of this chaos. What I want you to do is to join with your brothers and sisters, and we are going to be co-partners. We are going to work this thing through. I have come to show you how it looks." We have this incredible life of God made flesh working with us. It is so obvious that what surrounded Jesus' life were two energies: One energy was that of people drawn to him and finding something within him that was just extraordinary. Something that felt so right and good, even though it couldn't always be explained and articulated. And so peaceful. And at the same time, an energy where people hated him. They had to destroy him. They had to silence him, get him out of the way. These two energies fascinate me. They co-exist. They both have their role; they both have their task to perform. It's so important that we find our roots. Then, when we find our roots, we sit comfortably in this place of peace.

Let's look at the images in the Scripture today. The one I want to draw the most from is the image of the "Three Kings," as they are sometimes called. "Kings" is perhaps not the

best word to use for them. They are really three seekers. They are of the priestly caste, and they come from Persia. They belong to a very interesting group of priests called Zoroastrians. They were noted for two wonderful qualities. They were great at listening to their dreams - and also to the signs in the heavens, the stars and the planets. Here was a group of men very much focused on listening to voices above them and inside of them. They listened attentively in all directions. They would be open to hearing things that wouldn't make a lot of logical sense. Always, though, these signs were subtly giving them direction. They listened to and interpreted their dreams. They became extraordinarily gifted at this. They were constantly listening to the deepest voice within all of us, the unconscious. As they listened to that unconscious voice, they got a sense of their longings and where they were going, and what direction their psyche was moving in. Then we have the wonderful image of them looking to the heavens, to something outside of them, beyond them, higher than them - and listening to the direction that came from there. With these two issues going on inside of them - listening to themselves, listening to the powers beyond them - they ended up being extraordinarily sensitive to what was really going on. To what was happening in the universe. They were listening, watching, and paying attention. These three seekers knew the passage from Isaiah we just listened to where there would someday be this incredible, splendid event. It's interesting that this particular passage from Isaiah comes to the people toward the end of the book. It's basically a sign of great hope.

The Israelites have lost everything. They have lost their temple, the glory of it all. They have lost their prestige and place. They have lost their homeland. They have just come back to see the destruction of their temple. All the glory of that institution is gone. But there is a glimmer of light that comes through in this particular prophecy. This prophecy foretells looking deeper, looking higher. There is chaos all around them. The effects of sin are very obvious in the lives of the Israelite people. They see all of the destruction, and yet, they have the sense that God is still with them. God has been faithful. God is there. God is in the temple. All of the precious jewels and great architecture of the temple are gone, but that doesn't take away from what the temple is and what it was always intended to be. It remains a symbol of the presence of God in their midst. I love this phrase, and I think this is the one the Zoroastrians must have said, "Of course. This is the way life is." It says, "You shall be radiant at what you see, and your heart shall throb and overflow." That is so powerful for me, because it means that when we truly see things as they are, when we see that amid the chaos - which has its own meaning and purpose - there is this incredible way of understanding the way life is unfolding. It gives us such hope. It gives us such energy. It's like our hearts start pumping. We are able to engage in something that we sense is so good and so life-giving. The Zoroastrian seekers were attuned to this event, this light coming into the world that had always been prophesied. They were more sensitive to this coming, certainly more so than Herod, who was the king at the time. Herod was terrified of anything that would take away his position of authority. He was everything but submissive. He was so terrified that someone would take away his position that he even killed two of his sons who looked like they might inherit his throne. He was about ready to kill a third son. Here is a man who is willing to kill life in order to preserve his life. He comes up against the Zoroastrians who naively ask, "Do you know anything about this child, the Christ, who is to be born?" Herod just simply says, "I really want to know about it." We know why Herod wants to know about this; he wants to go and destroy this threatening figure, this new king who has come into the world. Herod has no idea that this kingdom he is trying to preserve and the kingdom Jesus is trying to establish are at absolute opposite poles. Herod's has no life in it; Jesus' kingdom is filled with life.

We have the sense of these characters in this gospel passage being a perfect image of what we struggle with in this world we live in: There's a way in which I would love to find peace by having things within my control. I would like to say I am in charge. I would like to feel that my success that I tend to feel in getting a few things done is like, "Wow, this is making me feel very important. This is really wonderful." That's all a part of the world of Herod. "Don't anybody take away my place. Don't anybody take away my success and my importance." It would be interesting to know what each and every one of us sees as that which makes us most valuable and most important to ourselves and to those we really love. Then, to compare this with what Jesus is trying to put us in touch with, that the Zoroastrians seemed to know, that a new vision was coming into the world. A light that was inviting people to see something extraordinarily different. In the second reading, St. Paul says that he is a steward of this insight, this grace. He certainly saw it. He was blinded by light at one point in his life. He saw not only the marvelous star that the Three Kings were following, but when it hit Paul, it was blinding. It was so bright. Paul says that the insight he received (and this is often misunderstood today with our level of awareness and consciousness because it doesn't seem like such a staggering statement) was that God was there for everyone. This is the insight Jesus brought to the world: God's love, mercy and forgiveness are for everyone. That was shattering to these people's world view, because they had a very narrow world view that they were the chosen ones. They had this incredible system of people who were on the inside and people who were on the outside. People who were saved, people who were condemned. It's that sort of narrow world vision that everything is somehow about me and about my people and about my religion and my way. The thing that makes me feel great about myself is that I have the better way. Jesus comes to blow that apart. He says that it's not about a narrow vision of the world or of goodness that we have created. It's something much bigger and much broader. It's something much more natural. It's something that feels so much better when we sense it, feel it, and taste it. Everybody and every thing is a partner, a co-worker, in this whole process of salvation. There no longer are good guys vs. bad guys. We no longer have an in-crowd, out-crowd. Sacred or profane. Those are categories that don't make a lot of sense anymore, if we understand what this child represents.

This incredible light comes into the world to change everything. The Three Kings, who are seekers, are very sensitive to what is really going on. They have listened very attentively to their souls and to the soul of the universe. They are offering everything they have to this child. The images of gold, frankincense, and myrrh are interesting to me. Gold could be a symbol of a metal filled with both purity and light. Let's just imagine gold represents the gifts we possess - whatever wealth we possess. Whatever we produce. We submit the energy that we have produced and say, "Take the energy I have produced and use it. Direct me in it. Guide me." The frankincense is such an interesting image of a material that is burned and transformed by the heat. It is turned into some kind of soft and gentle movement toward the heavens. It's another great image of submitting, going through the process of transformation and giving ourselves over to the process. Myrrh is an oil used for anointing. It's all about being the anointed one, as Christ was. We are longing to be anointed with this awareness, this consciousness, this sensitivity that Jesus had. We are all destined to be the anointed one, the Christ. The Epiphany is truly a great feast. It's a marvelous way of celebrating the end of the feast of the Incarnation. Let us delight in the insight we have been given and try to follow the way of these extraordinary men, the Three Kings.

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