

Feast of the Epiphany
January 6, 2019
St. John's Cathedral

The Magi (also known as the 3 wise men) are at center stage again today as we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. We first saw them in December, sort of bringing up the rear in our Christmas pageant. In many pageants, children in bathrobes bearing traditional gifts play the roles of these scholars from far off who visit and pay homage to the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem. Here at the Cathedral our Magi are adults, dressed in exotic costumes provided years ago by Ina Johnston, and singing the verses of "We Three Kings."

During this past week I've watched the slow progression of the beautiful ceramic Magi— and a camel — as they journeyed to our manger scene move slowly toward the creche, inching their way up the north aisle. Their progress is shrouded in mystery Finally they have found baby Jesus.

However the Magi are portrayed, these strangers from afar, bearing gifts, play a role that opens some windows for us into what this Feast of the Epiphany is all about. The word 'epiphany' means revelation or a new awareness, a manifestation. It is about seeing something through new eyes. And that is what is occurring in today's story from Matthew. The discovery of the newborn king begins to shape the story of our faith.

These Magi (no one really knows who they were, or how many of them were on the trip) came from far off. Most likely they were astronomers or astrologers rather than kings — stargazers of a sort. They could have been Zoroastrian priests, perhaps from as far away as Asia, Africa or Europe. Likely they were scholars of some kind. Certainly they were outsiders to

this manger scene – coming from a distance and from another culture, following the mysterious star to Bethlehem. This is a key part of this story.

This shows us a widening of Jesus' impact. His birth impacts – and continues to impact the whole world, not just his immediate family and community. And as we move through the season of Epiphany, our Sunday readings will tell the stories of how his life and ministry revealed his lordship. Stay tuned for that.

Along the way on this journey, the Magi encounter King Herod, who is also curious about where to find Jesus, but more to harm him out of jealousy than to honor him. Once the Magi discover the manger at Bethlehem and present their gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. – costly gifts worthy of a newborn king. Then, after a dream warning them of Herod's evil intent, they depart without tipping him off.

This is all a very familiar story to us, mostly because we revisit it every year – act it out, sing about it, send Christmas cards with illustrations of, hear its every detail. It has become a comfortable piece of the gospel story for us to hear.

Oddly, though, two famous poems about this story have a more somber quality. T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" speaks of a rough journey – the dead of winter, the camels' wounded feet, the dirty villages along the way. The birth of Jesus, but also as well the death of Jesus. It is a solemn work. William Butler Yeats' shorter poem, "The Magi," is full of longing, portraying the Magi as having 'ancient faces like rain-beaten stones.' They seek the holy – the 'uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor' – in other words, the Christ child on the floor of the barn, a stark place.

Those are certainly not the stuff of Christmas pageants – or at least our customary Christmas pageants. But the poets at least show us that there are ways to reflect on this story that feel less festive and celebrative than we are today. Perhaps their versions are also a bit too gritty for us on a festival.

So we ask how does this story speak to us today? How does this familiar account inform our journeys or shape our journeys? Some of it probably has to do with our own search for the Christ child, whatever that looks like. What has been our journey of discovery? What will the continuing journey look like as we travel along through life longing to see anew – longing to be renewed? Longing for the hope that the new-born Jesus brought into our world? What new things have been revealed to us along the way? How have we discovered the holy? This is a way to engage our souls and our religious imaginations.

It's really about living into the story – inviting our imaginations to engage. One commentator suggested a family activity of entering into this story as if it were like a video game – a quest of sorts to discover the newborn Jesus. Players could choose roles – enter into the journey. Choose appropriate gifts. Follow the star. Seek Jesus. Make choices about how to deal with Herod, who was clearly up to no good. I'd like to give it a try.

My children, at middle school age, enjoyed a series of books that invited them to finish the stories they were reading. Invited them to put themselves into the story, choose a character or even create a new one, and then see what evolved.

And when my daughter Jennifer was in eighth grade in Berkeley, their year-long project in social studies and English was to write the story of a fictitious American family, starting around the time of the American revolution, and then continue through generations as history

unfolded. She loved that project and, I think put a lot of herself into her character. At one point the family were homesteaders. There was a romance that spanned the Mason-Dixon line during the Civil War. She came to see herself as part of history as this tale progressed and it really changed her view of history.

I think there are a lot of biblical stories that can invite us to do something like that and this is one of them. How is this story our story as well.?

That openness to the journey – to the challenge – is one of the things we can take away from this story. Moments of discovery. Moments when something of the holy is revealed to us. Moments when we see anew.

A few lines from a poem by David White express this spirit:

“Life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.
It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things, seen for the silence they hold.”

Another question we might carry with us has to do with our response to the newborn Jesus. The Magi brought gifts as they paid homage – valuable gifts. Gifts worthy of a king. The natural question here is, What are the gifts that we bring to the newborn Jesus?

I can't raise this question without sharing the end of one of my favorite seasonal books, “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever.” If you don't know it, it's the story of an unruly bunch of kids from a family from what they used to call the ‘wrong side of the tracks,’ who find their way into a normally proper, orderly and adult-controlled Christmas pageant at the local church. These children are not well behaved and really don't know much about the story. The rehearsals are memorably chaotic.

On the day of the pageant, Leroy, one of the boys from that family who plays one of the Magi, makes an unusual entrance. There is a strange thumping noise as he walks up the aisle, dragging his gift for the newborn Jesus. It is something big and bulky, not the tidy little gift that he was assigned to carry.

Leroy's gift, it turns out, is a large ham that his family had received from a food distribution for needy families. It was the very best thing he could find. It was the very best thing he could offer. Better than gold, frankincense or myrrh. A gift worthy of a king.

Of course the best gifts aren't usually hams. They are gifts from our best selves. Those things enable us to share God's love – manifest God's love – reveal God's love.

Our Epiphany question is this: What is the gift I offer to Jesus? What is the gift I bring? What is that very best thing I can offer to honor Jesus? That is an Epiphany question worth pondering.