

FIRST IMPRESSIONS EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Isaiah 60: 1-6 Psalm 72 Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2: 1-12

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I got my first wristwatch as a Christmas present. I was eleven and felt like an adult. I really felt “mature” when someone would ask for the time; a flick of the wrist and I gave it to them. But I was still a kid and what I really liked about the watch was that it glowed in the dark. When I would put the watch up to a lamp and then turn off the light, the face of the watch glowed for a few minutes. You could tell the time in the dark! How cool was that!

Eventually, whatever light the watch “captured” on its chemically-treated dial, faded. (We used to think the numerals and hands were painted in radium and that was why it glowed in the dark. I doubt the Atomic Energy Commission dispensed radium to children’s watch manufacturers to make glow-in-the-dark watches.) The watch required a direct light source in order for it to work its magic for me. After it faded in the dark the watch needed to be placed close to the light so that it would once again glow when the lights were turned off – for a while.

I am reminded of that watch as I hear the Isaiah reading today, the feast of the Epiphany. In our tradition the new liturgical year begins with Advent. But the celebration of the Epiphany antedates that of Christmas and for some Christian churches Epiphany begins the church year. Along with Christmas and next week’s feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Epiphany is a feast of God’s manifestation; God provides the light for people in the dark and those upon whom it shines “glow” when they receive it.

Today the magi, usually associated with wisdom, come close to the light, do homage and are illumined by what they see. Their lives are altered, or as Matthew puts it, “they departed for their country by another way.” We can’t follow the same old ways once we have seen ourselves and the world by God’s light.

The Isaiah reading sounds as if people have just emerged from darkness. A light has been switched on for them – “Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines on you.” It’s wake-up time for those who have lived in the gloom of the shadow of death. A call goes out to those laid low – “Rise up in splendor.”

Jerusalem!”

What’s the reason for this call? Where did the light in the dark come from? Certainly not from the people’s ingenuity or initiative. “It’s dark in here, let’s turn on the lights.” No way! The darkness is profound; it is likened to the one that “covered the abyss” (Gen. 1:2) before the creation. Only God can create a light that can enter such darkness. The prophet reminds us that the darkness still lingers, “See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples” But that’s not the end of it.

God will not let darkness reign supreme. “See...upon you the Lord shines.” For believers there is light, for God is coming upon us to pierce the darkness of our sin and ignorance with a light to direct the steps of our long journey together. But with the gift comes responsibility. Others will walk by the light we have received. Like those watches, a light shines on us and us “glow” – then our responsibility is to reflect God’s light for others so they can tell what time it is in their darkness.

Isaiah is anticipating the restoration of Jerusalem – a deed that the Israelites could only accomplish with God’s help. And what a spectacle that will be! The crumbled city will “rise up” out of the darkness and others – the Gentiles – will see by this new light and be drawn to it. All the world will come to see that no one is an outsider to our God; no one people are better than any others. Someone has turned on a light and those who once dwelled in darkness can now see an open door. They approach, enter and are welcomed by others upon whom the light has shone. That was the experience of the Magi: the “outsiders” saw a light that led them to an open door, “...on entering the house they saw the child with Mary, his mother. The prostrated themselves and did him homage.”

[This is the season when I read T.S. Eliot’s poetic tale, “Journey of the Magi,” which begins, “A cold coming we had of it.” One of the Magi, the narrator, asks the question, “...were we led all that way for Birth or Death.

The year is very new and there still is much darkness on the horizon. We look at the days and months in front of us and wonder about how those suffering the severe economic collapse will fare; when the wars and strife will end in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Zimbabwe, Palestine, Israel and so many other places will end. When will peace rule peoples’ hearts? Isaiah and the Magi remind us God will not abandon us but will shine light on our dark winter days. Will all things get better immediately? Hardly! But the Magi represent those of us following the God-

provided light. It shines on the “insiders” and the “outsiders” – a way has been illumined, a path has been shown us, and we must continue to live by the light we have seen.

We pray at this Eucharist for clear minds, courageous hearts and the perseverance to stay on the path Jesus has manifested to us: the way of forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. If his is the path we follow, we too will shine in the darkness and be guides to others, to help them find their way home to a land and a people of light bearers.

The Magi did not unload their camels, dismiss their porters and settle down in Bethlehem to continue their homage to the Christ child. Matthew makes it sound as if they did homage to the child, quickly got up off their knees and then moved on. Maybe they went home to tell their families and friends about their journey and how the star guided them through the nights – you can’t see stars when there is plenty of light. Maybe we shouldn’t be terrified by the darkness in our world and our lives because, if God is true to form, a light will appear in the dark and keep us on track as we travel together.

We don’t know what changes discovering Jesus made in the Magi’s lives. They would have to reflect on their experience and adjust their lives to what they saw and learned from their journey. And so do we. No one can tell us exactly what shape our Christian discipleship should take. We do know that we did not take it upon ourselves to get up to go to Christ. Paul frequently reminds us – we were in darkness until God shone the light of Jesus into our hearts. We make the faith journey to him and now we travel “by another way.”

These Christmas time stories may be about angelic visitations, pregnancy and birth. But Matthew is also proposing the fuller gospel to us: the God of salvation is acting on our behalf and we are invited to respond with lives transformed by grace. Already there are hints of both acceptance and rejection of “the newborn king of the Jews.” Epiphany is not the end of the story – it is just the beginning for us. What difference will what is manifested to us today make in our lives? Will we accept the one who not only lies in a manger as a newborn, but will also be rejected? Throughout this liturgical year we will hear Jesus’ preaching, observe his works, follow him to his death and then experience his resurrection. It will be a year of many epiphanies for us.

As we leave church and the crib scene today we have confidence that no darkness we face can put out the light that burns within us. Hear Isaiah's promise, "Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow." Shall we resolve to continually turn toward the light we have seen, bow down to worship and then carry the light again into the world?

The Magi's quest reminds us that throughout our lives we are continually searching for God. We can never settle back into a comfortable piety and complacency, even though we feel we have "found God." There is more up ahead – pack up and keep searching.

We need to also respect the journey of sincere others; even when their way differ from ours. The truth is too big for any of us to claim to have it all. God cannot be grasped totally in my two hands, no matter how big they are. Let's kneel and do homage today to the eternal and holy One who comes to us in the form of a child but then grows into adulthood to invite us to follow the One we call, the Light of the World.

QUOTABLE

Each year at this time, thousands of Americans come to church, looking for something. For some it is simply a search for some shred of childhood ritual, a past form without present belief. For those holding the hands of their children, it is often a search for that thing that parents always want for their family, a direction in a world that seems without compass

—Anna Quindlen, "Soul Searching," *Santa Rosa (California) Press Democrat*, 5 January 1991, B4.

Quoted by Lynda H. Burris in, *THE ABINGDON WOMEN'S PREACHING ANNUAL: SERIES 1 – YEAR B*. Compiled and edited by Jana L. Childers and Lucy A. Rose. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) page 37.

Human Trafficking Awareness Day.

Sunday, January 11 is National Human Trafficking Awareness Day.

Human Trafficking or Trafficking in Persons is a modern-day form of slavery. Human Trafficking is defined as controlling a person through force, fraud or coercion—physical or psychological—to exploit the person for forced labor, sexual exploitation, or both. By federal law any minor exploited by prostitution or pornography is considered trafficked. The United Nations estimates that annually

27 million persons are trafficked globally: 80% are women; 15% are children. Trafficking is the fastest growing criminal activity throughout the world.

Victims of Human Trafficking can be found in sweatshops, forced prostitution, domestic servitude, restaurants, agriculture, construction, restaurants, hotel/motel cleaning services to name a few. Pope John Paul II called human trafficking “a shocking offense against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights.” Pope Benedict XVI addresses the trafficking in human beings as “a scourge.” As Catholics we are challenged to raise awareness about this heinous crime again women, children and men and to work toward ending it in our lifetime.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

...behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.

Reflection:

The Magi’s quest reminds us that throughout our lives we are continually searching for God. We can never settle back into a comfortable piety and complacency, even though we feel we have “found God.” There is more up ahead – with the Magi we pack up and continue our journey, trusting the light of the Spirit that is leading the way.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Has my faith practice become routine, performed out of the habit of years?
- What will I do this new year to put new life into my spiritual life?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

“When the fullness of time had come...”

"When all things were in the *fullness of time*, the messiah came". In her book, *In Search of Belief*, Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister speaks about the "fullness of time" with great wisdom. She speaks to all of us who wonder what our little part is

playing in the coming of the Kingdom. She speaks to those of us who get discouraged because we often do not see the success of our efforts. She says, "We forget that the fullness of time has as much to do with failure as it has to do with success. Time goes by and nothing seems to happen, until the fullness of time. Until all things are ready. *All we can do is to contribute to readiness.* And wait for it. In God's good time the drop of water that goes into the stream today will reach the ocean. In God's good time, the work we start in life will come to fullness- no matter who interrupts it on the way."

"The fullness of time is the moment at which all things are in place to enable something to happen. Success is not a matter of doing something perfectly. It is a matter of doing it until the time comes for it to happen, until God's time is fulfilled."

Each of us is important to God's plan and everything we do in love, in service, in peace, in prayer, in justice, contributes to the fullness of time. Our greatest gift is to play a small part in the hastening of that "fullness of time". We do not need to know when.

· Surely, the service and generosity of Sacred Heart parishioners to the poor at Moore Square, at WIHN meals, Helen Wright Center, Catholic Parish Outreach, in Aids Ministry, in the Share Tree and in Support Circles is hastening the fullness of time when all are recognized as brothers and sisters of the Lord, and all discrimination of every kind is ended, and our national policies are changed to reflect that belief.

· Surely, those at Sacred Heart bringing Eucharist and friendship through prison ministry are hastening the fullness of time when all prisoners have a place at the Lord's table and our justice system and national policies provide treatment for the mentally ill and addicted.

· Surely those at Sacred Heart who work to end war and to value all life, from conception to natural death are hastening the fullness of time when abortions, euthanasia, the death penalty, war and all actions which diminish life will be unthinkable.

As a community of followers of the Christ, who came in the fullness of time, let us encourage each other to fidelity and patience as we work and wait together for the fullness of God's time.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Eric Glenn Lane #0667195 (On death row since 7/11/05)
- Eddie Larmar Taylor #0762634 (8/25/2005)
- William H. Raines #0526698 (9/9/05)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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