

Receiving the Gifts of Epiphany
The Feast of the Epiphany, Sunday, January 9, 2022
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When my children were tiny, one of my favorite things to do was to watch them sleep.

It sometimes took them a while to get to sleep, but once they did ... it was just the best. And not just because it meant we parents could have a break. I used to love to watch them sleep – or even better, have them fall asleep on my chest. I miss that so much.

We used to do this thing called “skin time,” where they would lay on my chest, skin on skin, because we heard that skin touching skin released bonding chemicals in the brain. It’s why we hold hands. It’s probably at least part of why we crave touch.

If we are able to trust another person, if we are able to feel safe enough that touch is something we invite and accept, there is a comfort to their skin touching ours.

And that’s one of the most wonderful things about when we were infants. Except in cases of extreme trauma, we haven’t learned not to trust yet. All we know is what we need ... and pretty much all of it involves another person. Feeding. Changing. Holding. Even sleeping.

I can almost feel my children still sleeping on my chest. Smell the top of their head. Hear their tiny breaths. They were perfectly content, perfectly secure, perfectly at peace. Literally not a care in the world because their world was small and simple.

Sleep like that doesn’t last very long.

Soon – for some entirely too soon -- we begin to realize the world is complicated and scary. We develop language and ask questions and begin to understand that there is so much we don’t understand, so much we cannot predict.

There are monsters under our beds and in our closets. And sometimes the monsters are real.

And falling asleep and staying asleep becomes harder ... and harder ... and harder.

I usually fall asleep just fine ... it’s the getting back to sleep once I’ve woken up that is hard.

Because that’s when the questions, the complexities come out.

That’s when the anxiety begins to spike and the tapes of fears past begin to play.

And I long for the certainty of an infant.

I long for my world to be small and simple again.

I long to be held and trust that nothing can get me.

If for no other reason than I could just get some sleep.

How are you sleeping these days?

'Cause I'm not sleeping too well.

I find myself longing for simplicity and certainty. It's just all too much. I could go through the laundry list, but you already know it all too well. That we are nearly two years into this pandemic back streaming services from an empty church is all the evidence we need at how complex and unpredictable our lives are right now.

In times of great complexity and uncertainty, we crave simplicity and certainty. And our craving is human and natural and even good.

It is rooted in memories so deep we can't even access them.

It is rooted in a deep sense that we deserve to be held and protected and loved ... even if we have learned not to trust that sense to a profound degree.

Our craving for simplicity and certainty. Our need to be held and protected and made to feel safe is our greatest strength because it is the source of our hope for tomorrow, our vision of beloved community where we are safe and free because all are safe and free.

And it is our greatest vulnerability because we long for it so deeply, and we can be so tired and afraid, and we can feel so powerless against the complexities and uncertainties of the world that we are prey to people and ideologies that will promise us simplicity and certainty and power in exchange for our allegiance and willingness to demonize the other. That will build walls around us to block the complexities and uncertainties and dangers of the world from our view as a poor substitute for those arms that used to hold us as we slept.

You will always see a rise of fundamentalism, a rise of fascism, a rise of intolerance of the other whenever we are in a time of great complexity, uncertainty and peril.

It happens in history, and it happens in our individual lives.

And there will always be people and institutions that will take advantage of this ... and some have so fully drunk the Kool-Aid (and I remember Jonestown and I use that phrase intentionally) ... some have so fully drunk the Kool-Aid that they become convinced that they and they alone can save the people even as they are leading them to oppression, enslavement and death.

This morning's Gospel reading has the power of ancient lore. Many if not most of us have been hearing it since our earliest days. It is part of the manger scene imprinted in our mind's eye. Shepherds. Animals. Mary, Joseph and Jesus in the manger. And the three kings, or magi, or wise ones or astrologers .. who traveled far from the East following a star.

To us, they can just be part of the cast. Supporting actors in the drama. Maybe a little better than being cast as a shepherd or a sheep in the pageant but certainly not as prestigious as Mary or even Joseph.

And ... there is an important history to this story. And it has everything to do with our very human need to feel certain ... and powerful ... and safe.

We find the beginnings of this story in our reading from Isaiah. The people have returned to Jerusalem from exile and are needing reassurance that God will never let that happen again. That no other nation will ever displace and deport them and destroy the Temple. And so, the prophet sings in triumph

“Arise, shine, for your light has come! The glory of God is rising upon you! Though darkness still covers the earth and dense clouds enshroud the nations, upon you the Almighty now dawns, and God’s glory will be seen among you!”

“The nations will come to your light and the leaders to your bright dawn! Lift up your eyes and look around: they are gathering and coming to you – your daughters and your sons journey from afar, escorted in safety; you will see them and beam with joy, your heart will swell with pride.

“The riches of the sea will flow to you, and the wealth of the nations will come to you.”

By the time Matthew was written, the very thing the people in Isaiah’s time had feared had come to pass. The second Temple had been destroyed. They were once again subjugated and enslaved. Their lives were not their own. They were uncertain ... powerless and most definitely unsafe.

And so, whether or not three visitors from the East actually called on the infant Jesus, the image was deeply meaningful to a people whose lives were completely out of control.

It doesn’t have to be this way.

It won’t always be this way.

I know you feel powerless now, but in Jesus, who died and rose again, we have the one foretold from ages past to whom all nations will bow down. In Jesus, Mary’s song becomes reality. The mighty are put down from their thrones and the humble and meek are exalted.

It doesn’t have to be this way.

It won’t always be this way.

Someday ... you will be able to sleep in peace.

This is powerful and even necessary hope and truth for oppressed people. And ... it is extraordinarily dangerous and destructive theology for people in a position of power.

And that is what happened.

As Empire recognized the power of this narrative and co-opted it for themselves, they used it as justification for the very oppression from which Christ came to deliver us.

It became the justification for the Crusades. In Europe and in this land, as Christianity got attached to White Supremacy, it became the theological justification for the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny, for building a nation and an economy on the mass genocide of one peoples and the kidnapping, enslavement and torture of others.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously observed, "When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. They said: 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible, and they had the land."

And the story continues.

It is fuel for the fire of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism throughout the centuries.

It is fuel for the fire of the Crusades that continue against the Muslim world ... igniting their own fires of fundamentalism that continue to react with Christian and other Western fundamentalisms in an ever-escalating conflagration.

Most recently, the attempted coup a year ago was fueled by a president and others who saw opportunity in the power of the blasphemy against Jesus that is Christian Nationalism. Parading on the Capitol with cross and noose – either unaware or unconcerned that these instruments of lynching were what Christ came to destroy not proliferate.

In subtler yet no less deadly form, it finds expression in the anti-vaccination movement that denies the complex and disturbing realities of the world in favor of a simplistic theology of demonization and divine protection that endangers both self and neighbor and keeps this pandemic raging, particularly among those most vulnerable and least able to get the care they need to survive.

So, what do we do with this story?

What do we do with the three kings, or magi, or astrologers ... or whatever?

One possibility ... and there are many ... is to look more deeply into the story. Into the whole idea of Epiphany as revelation of wisdom. To try, if not to tell the whole story, to widen and deepen our lens and at least tell more of it.

Because the story of Epiphany is more than visitors from the East traveling far, following a star and kneeling before the baby Jesus. And there are three other parts of this story I want to lift for our consideration.

First, the visitors brought gifts ... and the holy family received those gifts. They recognized the value of these visitors from other lands and cultures and faiths, the value of what they had to offer. They did not take from them but rather received from them, honored them, treasured them, let them become part of what sustained them ... and then let them go on their way as they were.

And that leads to a second observation ... the story of Epiphany is not a conversion story. The visitors from the East did not stick around to learn from Jesus and adopt his ways or the ways of his culture or people and there is no attempt made by the holy family to make that happen.

The only attempt at coercion comes from Herod ... and the visitors reject it.

This is a story of different cultures and faith traditions honoring each other by offering the best of what they have to the other and accepting it with grace and humility. The story does not seek to deny or resolve any of the complexity of a multicultural, multifaith world. To impose a false sense of security through certainty and dominance.

The visitors return to their land to continue as they were, and Jesus is left to grow up as he is ... and yet what is different is a bond of respect, honor and love. The kind of bond that is the clarion call of beloved community and the death knell of Empires.

Which leads to the third observation. And that is in the face of this act of grace, honor and love, the forces that would try to impose false certainty and security through demonization and domination not only did not go quietly into that great night, they doubled down.

For here is what comes next in Matthew's Gospel:

“Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’

“Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod....

When Herod saw that he had been tricked, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from them.”

That is what happened then and that is what is happening now as we see backlashes against movements of beloved community and justice.

That is what is behind attempted coups through violence and legislation.

Herod is infuriated once more.

And yet, God's response to a world that is complex and dangerous is not to deny reality or to use demonization and domination to impose security through uniformity.

Not only does God reject that path, God actively leads the Holy Family into an even more complex and uncertain situation.

Instead of returning to the security of home, they become refugees in another land – dependent on the very hospitality, grace and love they showed the visitors to the manger... even though the gifts they brought were far more meager.

That is what is in store for us if we are to follow Jesus. Not a life of greater simplicity but of diving more deeply into the complexity of life in this world.

And ... relying on the grace, hospitality and love we give and receive from one another.

And trusting that God is there with us and through us.

And that in God and each other, we will always be enough, we will always have enough.

The wisdom revealed at Epiphany is not that we will never be able to sleep well again. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ are our promise that

It doesn't have to be this way.

It won't always be this way.

And ... the road to that promise realized is not denial of reality and a false sense of security through demonization and domination of the other.

It is in giving and receiving our best gifts to and from each other without demand of conversion, trusting that love will ultimately convert us all into her image. In honoring the image of God in different forms and rejecting the false Gospels of all types of supremacy.

It is recognizing that we find our soft resting place in the arms of each other.

That skin of different hue and story can touch.

That God is drawing us all together to live, and dance and work and play ... and sleep in peace.
Amen.