

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY ~ 08 January 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

“Arise, shine; for your light has come” (Is 60:1) – with these words, the Liturgy of the Word for the Feast of the Epiphany begins, a feast, which together with the celebration of the baptism of Jesus, brings the days of Christmas to an end. Threaded through our Liturgy of the Word today are themes of light, seeing, power, gifts, and journey.

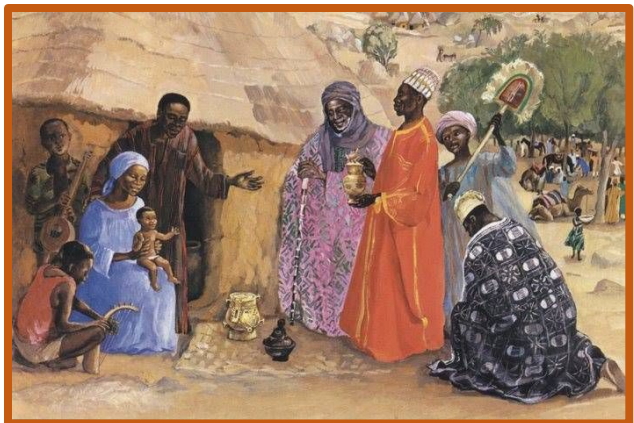


Light – the reading from Isaiah 60 speaks to a new beginning, “Arise, shine,” as the people return to the Promised Land from the exile in Babylon, a time of rebirth and renewed hope. That new beginning is inclusive; it is for young and old and for women and men, “Your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms” (Is 60:4), and it is for all peoples and nations not just the people of Judah, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . .the young camels of Midian and

Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come” (Is 60:3, 6).

The nativity narrative in Matthew’s Gospel consciously uses the same imagery of the nations’ coming to the light (the Wise Ones following the star), the bringing of gifts of gold and frankincense, and the inclusion of peoples who are not Jews (“from the East”). Matthew’s story gives that same sense of something new happening, a hope being reborn, of newness flowing from tradition but going well beyond it.

Seeing – the word “epiphany” does not occur in any of our readings but has been used of this feast in various ways since the 4th century. The word comes from the Greek word ἐπιφάνεια (*epipháneia*), meaning an appearance or manifestation or revelation, here meaning the revelation of God in the person of Jesus the Christ, in creation, in day-to-day experience, in sacred stories. The writer of the letter to the Ephesians says, “the mystery was made known to me by revelation” (Eph 3:3). And Veronica Lawson reminds us, “The ancient feast of the Epiphany reminds us that the whole created universe is in God and that God is in us. It celebrates the presence of God who is revealed to us in wondrous ways. . . A deep awareness of our place in the Earth community and kinship with the more-than-human teaches us respect for all being and respect for the power of God’s Spirit to lead us beyond ourselves towards a more profound encounter with the divine.” The reading from Isaiah give and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice . . .



The Magi Visit the Baby Jesus, Jesus MAFA

Power – while the readings speak about power among peoples, it gives an image of power far different from our usual expectations. In the reading from Isaiah, the coming of leaders of nations

is balanced by the “daughters being carried in the nurses’ arms.” The king’s role is clearly described in Psalm 72. The king is powerful, with “dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Ps 72:8), and the kings of Tarshish and of the isles, of Sheba and Seba, bring him tribute and gifts. But his role is to “judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice” so that “In his days may righteousness flourish and and peace abound” (Ps 72:2). His job description is succinctly stated, “For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy” (Ps 72:12-13).

In the Gospel narrative, this sense of power is profoundly addressed as the king who holds power certainly does not live the image described in Isaiah and Psalm 72. The Wise Ones have no hesitancy in seeing the powerful one as a little baby, “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage” (Matt 2:11). The Jesuit John Foley says simply, “The child’s weakness shows what God has in mind as an answer to evil: *tender, unfearing openness to love.*” His words are echoed by Veronica Lawson rsm as she finds in this feast “an invitation to be wary of those who find their positions threatened by a different sort of power, power based on vulnerability and openness to new life.”



Gifts – the three gifts named in Matthew’s narrative have given us the sense that there were three Wise Ones. In fact, we do not know how many Wise Ones they are, whether they are all men, what races they actually are, or whether they rode on camels!. We know from the passage in Isaiah that gold and frankincense were brought in tribute to mark the new time after the return from exile. Many explanations have been given why these three gifts are the ones chosen. Let us reflect on three possible explanations.

Jan Richardson goes back to the Old Testament to find an explanation. Isaiah and the Psalms refer to kings who bring gold to honor a great ruler. For the wise men, the gift of gold was a way of acknowledging Jesus as a king. In Exodus 30, God tells Moses to make an incense that includes frankincense, for use in the tent of meeting, where God meets with the priests; God tells Moses, “It shall be for you most holy.” The wise men’s gift of frankincense symbolizes that God has come in the person of Christ, that Christ himself has become the place of meeting between divinity and humanity. Myrrh was associated with funerals and was used in the process of preparing a body for burial. The Wise Ones intended it not as a morbid gift but rather as a reminder to Jesus that, even for him, earthly life is brief, and we are called to use it well. Richardson encourages us to reflect on and learn from these gifts:

The gift of gold, the gift that recognized Jesus was as a king, invites us to consider the question: **Who were you born to be?**

The gift of frankincense, the gift that recognized Jesus as the one who is a meeting place of humanity and divinity, invites us to ponder the question: **How do you want to encounter God?**

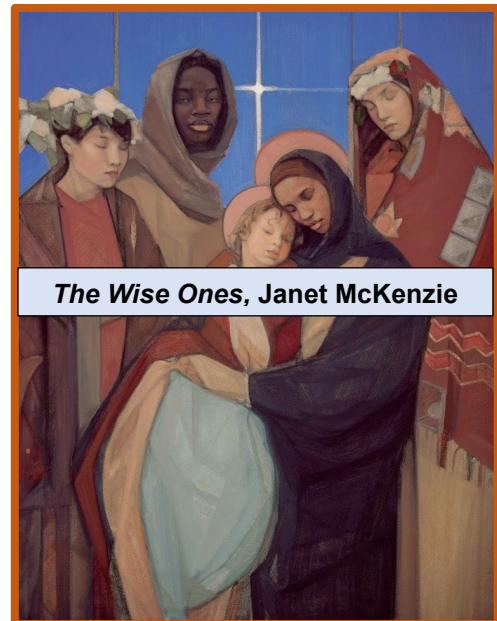
The gift of myrrh, the gift that recognized that even for Jesus, earthly life is brief, a twinkling of an eye, invites us to reflect on the question, **What is your relationship with time?**

With respect to the third gift, Richardson quotes Annie Dillard who writes, “How we spend our days is, after all, how we spend our lives. . .Live every day as if it were your last and then someday you’ll be right.”

John Philip Newell sees another meaning in the gifts – for Jesus and for us: “gold, a costly stone that speaks of the preciousness of the Child; frankincense, a blessed aromatic that signifies the sacredness of the Child; myrrh, a curative ointment that points to the healing gifts of the Child. Preciousness, sacredness, healing – this is what the magi are looking for and come to adore. . . **We carry within us the precious gold of life, the sacred fragrance of God, the healing salve of love.** Let us live it together.”

Through the medium of art, Janet McKenzie gives us another insight into the meaning of the Wise Ones and their three gifts: “Women around the world find an image of the Epiphany that includes and validates their encounters with the One Who Saves, celebrated here in the powerful, protective and tender manifestation of a mother and her child, embraced and nurtured by a loving community. Here is global inclusiveness and a vision of mutuality and interdependence – the giving and receiving of the **three gifts essential to life itself: presence, love and daily bread.** Epiphany proclaims again and anew: Christ for all people. God’s favor extends to all!”

Journey – in the reading from Isaiah, the people are journeying back to the Promised Land, having spent forty years in exile in Babylon. Their journey has taken them from a place of loss and hopelessness to a place of hope and radiance and peace. In Matthew’s story, the Wise Ones journey from the East, following a star, trusting that they would find new meaning and new hope. Having found that new meaning and new hope in a newborn baby, they journey back but by a new route. Jan Richardson describes that journey – coming and returning – beautifully:



The Wise Ones, Janet McKenzie

There is no reversing this road.
The path that bore you here goes in one direction only,
every step drawing you down a way by which you will not return.
You thought arrival was everything,
that your entire journey ended with kneeling in the place
you had spent all to find.
When you laid down your gift, release came with such ease,
your treasure tumbling from your hands in awe and benediction.

Now the knowledge of your leaving
comes like a stone laid over your heart,
the familiar path closed and
not even the solace of a star to guide your way.
You will set out in fear. You will set out in dream.
But you will set out by that other road
that lies in shadow and in dark.

We cannot show you the route that will take you home;
that way is yours and will be found in the walking.
But we tell you, you will wonder
at how the light you thought you had left behind goes with you,
spilling from your empty hands,
shimmering beneath your homeward feet,
illuminating the road with every step you take.

Ron Rolheiser omi gives us an added insight into the return journey of the Wise Ones, “Their slipping away into anonymity is a crucial part of their gift. The idea is that they now disappear because they can now disappear. They have placed their gifts at the feet of the young king and can now leave everything safely in his hands. His star has eclipsed theirs. Far from fighting for their former place, they now happily cede it to him. Like old Simeon, they can happily exit the stage singing: now, Lord, you can dismiss your servants! To bless another person is to give away some of one's own life so that the other might be more resourced for his or her journey.”

We conclude with a prayer-poem by the Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, again reflecting what this journeying means for us:

The Nativity, Sister Mary Clare Augustine Moore

On Epiphany day, we are still the people walking.
We are still people in the dark,
and the darkness looms large around us,
beset as we are by fear, anxiety, brutality, violence, loss –
a dozen alienations that we cannot manage.
We are – we could be – people of your light.
So we pray for the light of your glorious presence
as we wait for your appearing
we pray for the light of your wondrous grace
as we exhaust our coping capacity
we pray for your gift of newness that
will override our weariness;
we pray that we may see and know and hear and
trust in your good rule.
That we may have energy, courage, and freedom
to enact
your rule through the demands of this day.
We submit our day to you and to your rule, with
deep joy and high hope.



How rich is the wisdom embedded in today's feast of the Epiphany! May this wisdom become for us the star to guide us in this new journey of 2023, a journey marked by the promise of Psalm 72, “you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice”!