

January 3, 2021
The Epiphany of the Lord
Matthew 2:1-12

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, 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."

When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage."

After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Background:

Matthew's first chapter ends with Joseph carrying out the instructions he had received in a dream. "When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus." (Matthew 1:24-25) Matthew omits the birth of Jesus and angels announcing the birth to the shepherds. The next event that Matthew describes is the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem. There is a temptation to fill in Matthew's missing events. Another approach would be to spend some time considering what Matthew wants his community to focus on by his unfolding of the story of the birth of Jesus.

Matthew's unique presentation of the birth of Jesus includes details like Joseph accepting Mary into his home as his wife, which spared Mary the possibility of being sent away in quiet disgrace, or even the possibility of being stoned. He also reports that it is Joseph who gives the child the name Jesus, the name Luke reports was given to Mary at the annunciation. "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus." (Luke 1:31) Matthew also does not include events like the census, not finding room in the city and therefore seeking shelter in a manger, the angels declaring the birth, and the shepherds' experience of the scene. Matthew does not even name Mary in telling us of the birth of Jesus. Despite not having relations with Mary, Joseph takes on the responsibility of the child as if he were his son, and giving him the name Jesus is one of those responsibilities. But Matthew provides other details that will help his audience understand how God has been unfolding God's plan in the birth of this child. Some of Matthew's details are present in today's gospel text.

The Magi were part of the gentile world into which Jesus was born. The Magi studied the heavens for clues to the meaning of life. They functioned as political and religious advisers to the rulers of the Median and later the Persian empires. At one point in Persian history, the Magi revolted and replaced their king, demonstrating their importance within their culture. Given that they were looking for a person of significance, it is no surprise that they would first go to Jerusalem, the center of the religious and political world of Judea.

But Jesus is an entirely different kind of king. He is not to be found in Jerusalem, but rather in the small isolated community of Bethlehem. When the Magi arrived there and entered the house, they discovered the child with his mother, and then prostrated themselves before the infant. Matthew has described this encounter between the Magi and the child Jesus in such a way that his audience recognizes that even those without the benefit of their sacred tradition are able to recognize the hand of God at work. Creation itself is revealing the way, so that those who are open and seek the ways of God can recognize what has taken place. Who these Magi were, their names, how many there were--the details that have been added later are not described by Matthew. The Magi are important because they help establish that the whole world was affected by what God had done, and now they can fade into history. Once the Magi have seen the hand of God at work in the child Jesus, they praise God and depart by another route.

The Magi's response to the birth of Jesus is in sharp contrast to that of King Herod, the living and reigning King of Judea. Herod knows that he has not fathered an heir. Therefore, the news that there exists a newborn heir is not welcome. Herod is also different from the Magi in that he is merely a puppet ruler for Rome, while the Magi have esteem and authority in their society. While the Magi have nothing but a star that signals the birth of a person of importance, Herod has advisors who know of the prophecies about the birth of the messiah, but they seem to be oblivious to the fact that the child has arrived. Herod's reaction is one of distress, but he is not moved to personal action. Rather he directs the Magi to bring him the information he needs. The Magi have taken on the difficult and dangerous task of leaving their homeland to follow a star presumably at night through unfamiliar land to the person whom the star's appearance signifies. They have brought precious gifts that indicate his importance and they bow before him. Herod keeps his intention secret, and in secret he asks the Magi to supply him with information he will need.

The Magi and Herod represent two very different responses to the presence of Jesus. Those who have the advantage of being familiar with the religious traditions are unable to identify who Jesus is. They respond with fear, and, as we know the story, even murder of the innocent. Those without the benefit of being familiar with the religious tradition are willing take on personal risk. They recognize the significance of this infant's birth: God's love is powerful and pervasive--it will not be thwarted. They offer the gifts that they have, bow reverently, and take their leave.

Reflection Questions:

1. What do you know of the circumstances of your birth? Are there some details that get proudly told and others that are revealed with reluctance?
2. Do any of the details change depending on who tells the story?
3. When a newborn arrives at a family gathering, are there those who seem eager to hold and care for the infant and those who seem awkward around infants?
4. How do you relate to the fact that Matthew places Joseph in a more significant role in the birth of Jesus?
5. What feelings arise within you at Matthew's description of Joseph's role in the birth of Jesus?
6. The Magi were men who were comfortable enough with the darkness to study changes in the night sky. What are the areas of darkness in your own life today? How comfortable are you with talking about those areas of your life with others, or making them a significant part of your prayer?
7. Imagine yourself arriving with the Magi in Bethlehem and entering the house where Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are present together. What would you like to offer?
8. Can you take some time to talk with God about the roles of Joseph, the magi, and Herod in the birth of Jesus? Or maybe you would find it profitable to talk with God about your own efforts to discover God's present in some darkness that you are experiencing?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel.

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From Joe Thiel:

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for January 3rd, the Feast of the Epiphany, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. The gospel from Matthew tells the story of the magi arriving in Jerusalem, and ultimately delivering to Bethlehem their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." The other three readings all make references to this newborn king being not only king of the Jews, but king of all nations. In the first reading, Isaiah prophesys, "Rise up in splendor! The glory of the Lord shines upon you. Nations shall walk by your light; the wealth of nations shall be brought to you." Psalm 72 declares, "Every nation on earth will adore you. May he rule from sea to sea; kings shall pay him homage; all nations shall serve him." In the second reading, Paul writes to the Ephesians, "The mystery made known to me by revelation has now been revealed: that the Gentiles are coheirs and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus."

Happy New Year everyone!

Excerpts from readings for January 3, 2021, The Epiphany of the Lord

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples;
but upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory.
Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance.
They gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses.
Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow,
for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you.
Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah;
all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord.

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

*O God, with your judgment endow the king, and with your justice, the king's son;
He shall govern your people with justice and your afflicted ones with judgment.
Justice shall flower in his days, and profound peace, till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.
The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute.
All kings shall pay him homage, all nations shall serve him.
For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out, and the afflicted when he has no one to help him.
He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor; the lives of the poor he shall save.*

Brothers and sisters: You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for your benefit, namely, that the mystery was made known to me by revelation. It was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, 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." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling the chief priests and scribes, he inquired where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for it has been written through the prophet: You, Bethlehem, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel." Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Search for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may do him homage." They set out. And the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Excerpts from Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13; Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6; and Matthew 2:1-12