

## EPIPHANY SUNDAY

*Arise, shine, for your light has come.* Isaiah 60:1

*When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.*  
Matthew 2: 9

Epiphany. The moving star. The traveling Wise Men. The strenuous journey.

Those of us here last week heard Tom Ward's brilliant reading of T. S. Eliot's superb poem *The Journey of the Magi*, one of my favorites, in which Eliot tries to depict the journey from the perspective of one of the Magi.

Magi are star readers, folks believed to have special powers to manipulate the fate that the stars foretell, and were highly valued in ancient times as prophets and advisors to rulers and counsels.

Of course, the so-called Birth Narratives of Matthew and Luke are add-ons to the basic gospel narrative of Mark, the earliest. The narratives are intended to emphasize the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth, his exalted lineage, his humble beginnings, and the astonished worshipful response of all who were privy to the event.

In other words, they are fiction, and as such, have symbolic meaning and intent. Alicia asked me last week, "Why a manger, and a stable?" and Tony Apesos answered, "because it's the lowliest place."

And that's true, and certainly symbolic, as the shepherds in Luke's version are among the lowliest possible receivers of the Good News of *Peace on Earth, Goodwill towards all*. So, then, the Magi, the Wise Men, known in Luke's version as the Three Kings, represent a very high order of society.

So the Magi are high-end visitors to Bethlehem. What else can we say about them? They are pagans. They travel a long distance. They bring valuable gifts to Jesus. And they do not obey Herod in the end, although he has commissioned their journey. They are warned by a dream that fulfilling their mission would be undesirable, and presumably dangerous to the new baby and his family. So they have some kind of conversion experience, and return home in secret.

In T. S. Eliot's version, home no longer feels like home to them. The speaker says, *But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation/With an alien people clutching their gods.*

I devoted three rather grim hours this week to watching a documentary called *Lake of Fire*, about the abortion culture wars. As most of you know, I think, I've been a pro-choice activist for many years, and I've seen and heard and read a lot of stuff, but this was among the grisliest.

It was balanced in the sense that it gave equal airtime to both sides. But it showed only one reasonable pro-life speaker, and only one rather freaky and abhorrent pro-choice group, a punk-rock band/performance artist group. Otherwise, the prochoice speakers were reasoned and compassionate, the pro-lifers extreme, violent, and hate-filled.

Another way to put it is that the views presented by pro-choicers expressed ambivalence, ambiguity, and nuance, while the pro-lifers were absolutist and judgmental. In the views of some, all of us who are gay or pro-choice have been seduced by Satan, and should be executed. And interestingly, so should blasphemists. On those scores, I'd be dead countless times, as I dare say would most of you. Cheering, isn't it?

My years participating on the abortion dialogue project informed how I viewed this film, and taught me many things. One is that the women we worked with on the pro-life side were not the kind of extremists portrayed in *Lake of Fire*. They were leaders in the movement, but they were moderates, or they would not have agreed to meet with us at all. Another, though, is that they were, and are, not at all comfortable with ambiguity. They don't like shades of gray.

They all share a worldview that seems stuck in the Fifties; I was struck by this at our most recent meeting, in November. One of them referred to her Chinese doctor as "a pagan." Another is helping to build a social center in the Congo, and called the Congolese "the natives." The third reported that her divorced daughter and two grandchildren were living with her and her husband. "It's not normal," she kept repeating, "it's not normal." I forbore to say that in millions of American families, such constellations are indeed the norm.

Most of us here this morning are not, by that woman's standards, *normal*. Most of us are alternative, in one way or another, or many. Most of us, while perhaps yearning for certitude, live with ambiguity and a situational approach to ethics, I suspect.

And most of us value mystery, rather than being repelled or alarmed by it. Why do I say this? Because we are a sacramental tradition, and the sacraments are infused with mystery. The Eucharist? Baptism? What's clear and final about these rites? If you know, you're way ahead of me.

In these ways, I like to think, we resemble the Magi, or they us. Yes, they are symbolic, but the qualities they symbolize, beyond what I mentioned in the beginning, seem to me admirable and worthy of emulation.

They are adventuresome and persistent; they travel a long distance to find something foreign. The Gospel tells us, *When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy*, and while perhaps they sensed something miraculous, they may also have been very weary after a long, arduous, and probably dangerous journey.

They are both open-minded and reverent. They recognize the unlikely holiness of a Jewish baby in the humblest of circumstances, and they bow down to worship him. They value, I infer, compassion over obedience. We know from beyond this Gospel segment that Herod planned to, and did, kill many infants in a futile attempt to eliminate the prophesied Messiah. Presumably, that was what the Magi learned in their dream, and that was why they did not return to Herod and inform him of Jesus' whereabouts.

Above all, they dwell in the realm of mystery. They have mysterious powers to begin with, they set off on a mysterious journey, and they encounter the most mysterious birth ever known.

And that, dear ones, is the life we enter into as followers of Jesus. A life of mystery. A life of wonder. A life, at times, of overwhelming joy.

Alleluia! Amen