

HOMILY

Feast of the Epiphany, Sunday, January 9, 2022

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One of my favorite living theologians is John Dominic Crossan, a former Catholic priest, now Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at De Paul University and the author of numerous books. Several years ago he presented a weekend-long seminar here in Tucson. As part of his presentation Crossan, who believes that much of what is related in the Bible is metaphorical, talked about his many encounters with people who've confronted him over the years, insisting that the Bible is essentially a written history and that it's words are to be taken quite literally; that metaphor never enters the equation.

Dr. Crossan then likes to pose two important questions of them: first, "Do you believe that the Bible refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God?" to which they invariably reply "Yes."

And the second question: "Do you believe that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary?" Once again, "Yes" is the response

"So," says Crossan, "You must then believe that Mary had a little lamb!"

This exchange, silly as it is, drives home the point that the Bible does indeed employ metaphor. And it uses those metaphors and illustrative stories as teaching tools.

We all recognize that Jesus Himself used what we know as "parables" to teach important lessons to His disciples. Crossan also dares to suggest that maybe the Bible presents not only the parables of Jesus, but parables about Jesus. Could it be the Gospel writers utilized the same story-telling technique of parables to teach us important things about Jesus and His life?

We of course are celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany this morning, or as we might call it this year, the 15th Day of Christmas, since Epiphany was actually last Thursday. And you may have noticed that the beautiful porcelain Magi (which throughout Advent and Christmas had been displayed in the window to your right) have now appeared at the manger, and the poor shepherds have been banished to a table in the "back 40" over there.

Although we are on a 3-year lectionary cycle, our readings today are the same ones we read every year on Epiphany. I would contend that the story in our Gospel today – the story of the wise men – is one of those instances in which a story – a parable that has become part of Christian mythology – is being used to teach us something about Jesus.

Is that important? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But when we treat teaching stories as if they were events that actually took place in a specific time and place, we tend to overlook what they are trying to teach us. They become (and have become) mere symbols. Decorations to adorn Christmas cards and to serve as a backdrop in every Christmas creche worth its salt.

One clue that this story was the creation of the writer of the Gospel of Matthew lies in the fact that it only appears in the Gospel of Matthew – no reference to the Wise Men or the Star at all in the

other synoptic Gospels. While a great deal of what we know about Jesus' life and ministry are told – sometimes identically, sometimes with variations – in each of the gospels, this one about the Magi only appears in Matthew.

So why might the writer have included it? If we think about the entire narrative of Jesus' birth, it begins with the Holy Family being visited and worshiped by whom? Shepherds – the poorest of the poor, local folks from the countryside and considered to be on the lowest rungs of society. If the narrative had stopped there, we'd be left with the impression that only a handful of impoverished locals knew anything about the miraculous events of that night.

But here on the other side of the story we have people from far-off lands, wealthy people, also coming to worship the infant Jesus. All of this is likely narrative created by the writer to emphasize the momentousness of the Incarnation of God on Earth. That this birth was important in that it would be recognized not just by Mary and Joseph's friends and relations, but by people of all stations, people from all the known world.

In terms of birth narratives of that era, this one isn't really unique. The births of quite a number of important people – rulers and military leaders – were said to have been accompanied by the appearance of new stars. The writer was likely using that well-known narrative to emphasize that the birth of Jesus was at least as important as the birth of those other famous figures.

Assuming this story was cut from whole cloth by the writer of Matthew, we then need to look for the lessons the writer was trying to teach us. To begin with we might assume that the men who are its central characters presumably had lives elsewhere – with some kind of employment, wives and children, extended families, obligations and responsibilities – but were willing to leave it all behind to travel into the unknown. And for what purpose?

They'd seen something in the sky they couldn't have understood. We are not told that they'd had any kind of heavenly visitation beforehand, telling them that a new star would portend the birth of the Messiah. Nothing like that in the story. So we can probably conclude that these characters wouldn't have understood its significance, or whether it had any significance at all.

They didn't understand. And so they went looking for answers. This story, by the way, never calls them "kings" – that is a later spin on the story trying to tie it back to our reading from Isaiah 60 this morning. It calls them "wise men." And why were they wise?

When we think of "wise men" in our culture today, who do we think of? A tenured university professor? Nobel Prize-winning mathematicians? The million-dollar prize winner on Jeopardy? We tend to think of people who are wise as those who have all the right answers, don't we?

But the wise men in the Gospel this morning were wise not because they had all the answers, but because they were humble enough to acknowledge that they did not. They did NOT understand the significance of the star. So what do wise men do when they don't understand something? They go in search of answers. These wise men went off into the unknown, to an unknown land, understanding they were looking for something not yet clear to them, and being wise enough to realize they still had much to learn.

What exactly is an “epiphany” anyway? My quick Google search of the word tells me that in its original Greek it means “the manifestation of God as human.” The second and more common contemporary usage of the word however is: “an experience of a sudden and striking realization.”

Maybe the characters we call Magi in the story had an epiphany that meets both definitions. They came to a sudden and striking realization that God’s self was being manifest on Earth.

I’d bet that each of us, at one time or another in our lives, has experienced some kind of epiphany. They usually come when we are least expecting them – when suddenly it dawns on us that something we didn’t quite understand, or maybe understood in a particular kind of way, is actually different than we thought it to be.

Sometimes an epiphany causes us to question something important about ourselves that can lead to transformational personal growth. I’d like to share an example that comes from a friend.

Two weeks ago today I learned just before coming to St. Matthew’s that Archbishop Desmond Tutu died. In the days that followed I was remembering what The Rev. Chuck Robertson (who now holds the title of Canon to the Presiding Bishop for Ministry Outside the Episcopal Church) shared with me about how he met Bishop Tutu. I spoke to Chuck last week, asking that he re-tell that story to me. I use this story with Chuck’s permission.

Years ago, when he was rector of a congregation in the Diocese of Atlanta, Chuck was asked to guest lecture at Emory University. After the lecture and while walking across the quad at the center of campus, he caught a glimpse of a man who could only be Archbishop Tutu who was visiting the campus on sabbatical. The Bishop was walking in the other direction across the quad. Not wanting to miss an opportunity to meet this famous man, Chuck eagerly sprinted across the lawn to introduce himself, only to be stopped in his tracks by the large, imposing companion who walked alongside Bishop Tutu.

“The Archbishop is busy,” was all the handler said, and, feeling quite small and insignificant, Chuck nodded and began to turn away.

But then he heard the Bishop’s familiar voice saying, “Come, come. Tell me your name.” Chuck says that he stammered but somehow managed to blurt it out.

Then Bishop Tutu asked: “So, Chuck Robertson, tell me: what are you about?”

At that moment my friend Chuck experienced an epiphany. He realized he didn’t have a ready answer to that question. All the years he’d lived of his life to that point, having discerned a calling to ministry, going to seminary and now working as a parish priest – had not prepared him for that question. He became suddenly aware that he couldn’t summarize for this esteemed man the one thing that was the focus of his life – the one thing he was “about.” And he realized that maybe it was time he figured it out! THAT was what he would call an epiphany.

So as Chuck re-told this story to me, I kept asking myself: “How would I answer that question? What is the one thing MY life is about?”

And yes, I know: I am, and we all are, complex individuals who like to think we are “about” many things. But if I had been the one stopped by Desmond Tutu on the quad at Emory University, knowing he was in a hurry and being asked that question, how would I respond?

You see, sometimes epiphanies hit us when we are least expecting them, as they did for Chuck that morning. But sometimes we need to go looking for them. Maybe spending some quality time contemplating how we would have answered Bishop Tutu’s question can lead us to our own moment of epiphany.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians talks about his epiphany – how the mystery of God’s grace was made known to him through revelation when he was knocked to the ground and heard Jesus speaking to him.

But Paul – another “wise man” – didn’t stop with that “sudden and striking revelation” did he? He, like the wise men in the story, left his life behind to go in search of more epiphanies. He wanted to understand and embrace the people and the teachings of the man he had long ridiculed and persecuted. He wanted to discover as he says “the mystery that has been revealed to Christ’s holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.”

And – like the “wise men” in the story –he was wise enough to know that he didn’t have all the answers. And so what did he do? Like them he left behind his entire life and went in search of answers.

We all have the capacity to be wise men and wise women. But what does that take? Recognizing that we don’t understand and that we don’t have all the answers. Then embarking on a search for answers.

We might begin with the question: “What am I about?”