

Micah 5: 2-5a
Ephesians 3: 1-12
Matthew 2: 1-12

Clarity
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Listen to this poem, 'On the Mystery of the Incarnation':

It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
to no innocent form
but to this creature vainly sure
it and no other is god-like, God
(out of compassion for our ugly
failure to evolve) entrusts,
as guest, as brother,
the Word.

Denise Levertov had a glimpse of insight into a surprising mystery, and this is especially appropriate today, as we celebrate Epiphany. What's an epiphany? It is an appearance or a manifestation or a showing forth or a sudden insight. In a religious sense, it has come to mean the manifestation of divinity, as in a burning bush, or a whirlwind, or a vision from heaven or, in this season, a little baby. An epiphany always has an element of both recognition and surprise.

So we hear the words of the prophet Micah, speaking about a shepherd following in King David's footsteps, born in Bethlehem. We recognize Bethlehem, at that time a small town several miles from Jerusalem. But we are surprised that the child to be born there is not a warrior-king, like David. Instead, "He shall be the one of peace."

We recognize, with St Paul, that God revealed truth through prophets and through Jesus. But we are surprised, as he was at first, that these truths are made available to all people. Paul uses the word "Gentiles," but we might use the word "unbelievers." The shocking surprise was that unbelievers could "become fellow heirs...and sharers in the promise."

And every year we hear the story of men traveling from a foreign, pagan country looking for a special child. Here recognition and surprise are entwined on many levels. These men recognized the meaning of a certain star. Their own religion spoke of a messiah figure (a *Saoshyant* or savior) so they shared certain hopes with some in the Hebrew tradition. Meanwhile, Herod recognized this tradition, but knew that it was in conflict with his own regime. You might say that Herod's epiphany was based on fear. Then the surprises: not in holy Jerusalem, but in little Bethlehem. Not in a palace but a house with humble parents. And then the incongruity of those gifts, and the

surreptitious departure, those Persian Magi, those pagan astrologers, never seen or heard from again.

Let me suggest that these Scripture readings are not definitive. They do not seal the truth forever in the past. They are signposts. They are inspiration for our own epiphanies: those necessary and crucial recognitions and surprises that will help us meet God. Having heard words from the Bible to spark our thinking, we go on to ask, “What is being disclosed on a day of or a season of epiphany? What manifestation of the divine in our world is revealed? And, what makes God visible?”

Let’s begin with the last question and go from there. There is a need for our eyes to be opened (at least the eyes of the heart) and for our vision to be corrected (as least our vision of humanity) so that the blurry becomes more clear. So that the confusing becomes more purposeful. You might say that we need theological glasses or contact lenses with which to view the world, and then manifestations of God will pop into clarity. But, in many ways it is not a theological construct but a community that helps us to recognize God. And then, when the community widens its view and opens its heart, surprising things happen. We see things collectively that were never visible before.

A church community preserves wonderful traditions and insights from the past, not so that we can turn inward and backward, but so that we can discern ways that contemporary life brings us gifts from “outside.” Just as the author of Matthew’s Gospel saw that the foreign magi used non-kosher means (astrology) as a way to light their way to the Jewish Messiah, we try to see ways that contemporary spiritual yearning expresses itself.

A few days ago, I saw a video on you tube, following a suggestion from a friend. It was made as a kind of social experiment, but I think it was more of an epiphany. On the streets of Istanbul, a young man set up a sign that said, “I Trust You, Do You Trust Me ? Hug Me.” Then he put on a blindfold and stood there with his arms outstretched. And was filmed. For a while, nothing much happened, people walked by, sometimes read the sign, sometimes stopped and stared. Then a young woman stopped and gave him a hug, then walked on. Then, one person after another, male, female, young, old, black, white, brown, suited businessmen, backpack-wearing tourists, stopped and hugged him. The expressions and body language were so touching. Sometimes 3 people would go up and give him a group hug. And after each hug, the young man just returned to that position, arms outstretched and vulnerable. A compelling manifestation of trust. And, by the way, I did recognize that image of the outstretched arms from the life and death of another person, one who lived 2000 years ago. Eventually, the police took notice and stopped him the young Turkish man, giving him a \$45 ticket for “disturbing the peace.” My epiphany? I like a world when the peace gets disturbed like that

What if the story of the three magi and their quest for a special child announced a sea change in the world – a “disturbing of the peace” of those times. What if it was the signal that the world was changing, God was coming very close, and nothing would ever be the same. When they come to the young family in Bethlehem, we realize that God’s embrace is very broad, big enough to include insiders and outsiders. Something began to happen and we pray that it can still: the dissolving of mistrust and hate between people of different tribes and religions and colors and genders. As one commentator puts it: “the *magi* were only the tip of a very big iceberg.” Christ’s

outstretched arms wait for all. God was revealed in vulnerability: a moment of clarity and recognition and surprise.

I don't think that we can live in the constant state of piercing awareness that is epiphany. Like the magi, we see a revelation, and then start a journey. But we are changed by the sight of the tiny child, the feel of that vulnerable embrace, that dream of angel voices. We return home by another way, and in another frame of mind. Speaking of poetry, the poet Mary Oliver writes of this in *'Six Recognitions of our Lord.'*

“Then I go back to town
to my own house, my own life, which has
now become brighter and simpler, some-where I have never been before.”

Maybe the magi in returning home saw everything more brightly, with more clarity. May we do the same. Amen.