

Feast of the Epiphany

January 2, 2022

Reflection by Sister Belinda Monahan, OSB

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13, Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6, Matthew 2:1-12

The season of Christmas seems designed to give us a case of liturgical whiplash. We move from the joyous feast of the Nativity to the more somber feast of St. Stephen, first martyr (this year supplanted by the feast of the Holy Family, with its images of frantic parents and tween Jesus complete with attitude). Next comes the cozy, wine-infused feast of St. John, the beloved disciple; followed by the horrifying feast of the Holy Innocents. We end the Octave of Christmas with the Feast of Mary, Mother of God, which this year, leads us right to today and the feast of Epiphany—the official end of Christmas; although we're a few day shorts of our twelve days.

These feasts, the stories we associate with them, and the Gospels we read are familiar to most of us—we grew up hearing and reading them and our understanding of them grew as we did. Because of course, these stories are not *just* stories of events that happened 2000 years ago. If they were, we probably wouldn't be reading them today. After all, babies are born, even, or maybe especially into poverty and uncertain circumstances to parents who are overwhelmed and confused. People, including children, are still killed because of political ambitions, or fear or the neglect of those in authority. We tell and retell *these* stories of *this* child because each of these stories reveals another aspect of who we are, who our God is, and what it means to be a follower of Christ.

And certainly, there are things that the story of the Magi can reveal about what it means to be Christian: about the need to follow the light, about giving our best gifts to God, about the potential for having to reroute ourselves. For me, though, this year, the aspects that became clearest appeared when I look at today's feast within the entire season of Christmas. We think of Epiphany as the last day of Christmas—it was always the day my family took down our Christmas tree (which, yes, we put up on Christmas Eve). But we do not return to ordinary time tomorrow—We remain in the liminal period of “Monday after Epiphany” for another week. The revelation of God in today's Epiphany is not a God who provides tidy black and white clarity. God instead reveals Godself—and joins us—in the messy greyness of our lives.

Today, after the Christmas season's fairly steady diet of the Gospel of Luke with the occasional snippet from John (and OK, the feast of the Holy Innocents from Matthew which follows today's readings chronologically although not liturgically) we return again, to the Gospel of Matthew—written primarily for a Jewish audience. In Luke's Gospel, it is the shepherds—the men with no property of their own, who eked out a living on the literal margins of society, who first witness to Jesus' birth. In Matthew's Gospel, it is the magi—probably not kings, possibly astrologers, certainly wisdom figures, politically connected (after all they manage an audience with Herod), and (judging by their gifts) fairly wealthy. Different from the shepherds in their status, but similar in their position as outsiders; it is these outsiders to whom Jesus is revealed.

The second reading makes it explicit “Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.” The story of the magi, reveals to us that unity of all people; especially those whom we have marginalized whether because of their poverty or lack of status or because they are different in how they look or what they believe or how they behave.

Beyond the liturgical whiplash of the Christmas season, this past year may have given us another form of metaphorical whiplash. 2021 began in nearly complete lockdown with what was then the peak of Covid cases in this country, but also in hope occasioned by the vaccine rollout. We have spent the past year, re-engaging with the world, negotiating whether to mask or unmask (or remask) depending on the circumstances; and cases in the US are higher than they’ve ever been. While the presidential transition of power can hardly be called smooth, the transition did occur and many of us were cheered by the poetry of a young, black woman who encouraged us to be the light. But the country remains divided. The long-awaited withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan resulted in bloodshed and the return to power of a repressive totalitarian regime.

In the midst of this, Epiphany is a revelation to us that, despite disagreements in theology or politics, we are all members of the same body. That, being followers of Christ means we worship a God who entered the messiness of our world not only once 2000 years ago, but that he remains with us today. Merry Christmas.