

Homily for the feast of the Epiphany

January 5-6, 2019

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

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Several years ago, my husband and I had the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land. One of our stops was to go into the West Bank and visit Bethlehem where we celebrated Christmas Mass. During the course of our Eucharistic celebration, we were startled by rapid gunshots in close proximity. The Mass and the Christmas carols continued as if nothing had even happened. This was the reality of a conflict that has become commonplace and accepted.

In this “Little town of Bethlehem” stands the Basilica of the Nativity, the oldest standing Church in the Holy Land. Constantine the Great and his mother St. Helen commissioned this Church be built in 327 to honor the location of the birthplace of Jesus. Above the main entrance of this church is a depiction of the Three Magi.

This church survived the devastation of the invading Persian army in the early seventh century when the commanding officer recognized these three men as learned fellow countrymen. Since they were his people, he left the Church standing. Good decisions can be made in the midst of conflict. So despite all the conflict before, during and after Christ’s birth, Matthew describes the birth of Jesus as a fulfillment of many ancient Hebrew prophecies, showing God’s almighty hand in the event arriving at the perfect moment in history.

The arrival of these Three Wise Men from a foreign land played a significant role in the developing community of the followers of Christ. These three men were not Hebrew; they were Gentile. Yet, they came bearing gifts in adoration of Jesus. There was significant debate in this community of Christ as to whether Gentiles would be allowed to be a follower of Christ or if they had to convert to Judaism first. Peter and Paul argued exhaustingly over this dilemma. When Matthew included the visit of the Magi, he validated Paul's words in the letter to the Ephesians, "The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Paul traveled extensively to make sure that people heard the Good News of Jesus Christ. God's plan was that all people are invited to be followers of Christ.

The psalms were written centuries before the birth of Christ when the known world was limited. Psalm 72 talks about all the nations of the world bowing down in adoration to the God of Abraham. About 600 years later, these wise men bow down in adoration of the Son of God. At present time, we are aware of the nations of our world and the number of believers in the God of Abraham all over our world!

In one of the last chapters of Isaiah, the prophet calls the Hebrew people out of the Babylonian captivity back to Jerusalem. It is a prophecy to tell of the light that shall come to Jerusalem for them in the immediate future. It also foretells of the light of Christ coming into the world with gold and frankincense being offered as gifts and praises being proclaimed for Jesus the Christ centuries later.

Do these prophetic words of Isaiah need to stop at the birth of Jesus? Could it also not call us to see Jerusalem differently? Isn't it intriguing that the three major monotheistic religions find their beginnings in Jerusalem? Could Jerusalem rise in splendor again and be filled with light when the conflict between religious factions stops? Should we condemn fighting and not accept it as a reality? Let's imagine a world where war has ceased and buildings and churches are left standing and dream of a trip to Bethlehem to celebrate Christmas Mass without the rapid shots of an assault rifle!

Maybe we should all stop and think about our own conflicts with others: in our family, our neighborhood, our churches, our country. Can we start conversations where we can listen to each other? In a section of Psalm 72 that is left out of our lectionary, the psalmist tells of God defending the cause of the poor, deliverance to the needy and crushing the oppressor. Maybe when we remove the conflict with others, we can join forces to be God's hands in accomplishing the cause of the poor. Maybe then Jerusalem will shine again!