

Homily for the feast of the Epiphany of the Lord

January 2-3, 2021

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ephesians 3: 2-3A, 5-6; Matthew 2: 1-12

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To begin, the Magi didn't just happen to see the star. They had to focus their vision on the heavens. It's likely that other astronomers and astrologers saw the star too, but only three—for whatever holy or gainful reason—were willing to set everything else aside to invest precious time, energy and resources to follow it.

The story of the Magi appeals to us because, like them, we are always in search of our bearings. We try to discern a meaningful direction in life in the midst of chaos and absurdity. Perhaps the Magi were single-minded in their search. On the other hand, they may have had to change their way of thinking as they travelled, unraveling their next steps, as they consulted with Herod, his advisors and one another. The star and the angel's warning in a dream to return home by another route appeal to us too. We too have to read the signs that guide us through life. Sometimes inspiration comes from a far away or distant star, or through our subconscious or unconscious—through hunches and warnings that are in us and we know not why. But inspiration does come.

In this story, we find not just a tale about individuals and groups seeking God. We also find at play here issues about power.

This story is about a legitimate ruler and his reaction to a threat, for the Magi claimed that Jesus was the new king. The legendary ruthlessness of the House of Herod was well known. Upon hearing the news, Herod acted in a self-protecting way, making immediate plans to eliminate Jesus. It did not matter that he also eliminated 30-40 other male children who were the future of a town and the economic wellbeing of a region.

This simple tale exposes what happens again and again when regimes or institutions fear the loss of their supposed ultimacy. The life-giving power of God, this story proclaims, is greater than the destructive power of the world's dominating forces.

What is at stake here is an evaluation of where true power lies in the universe. Today, we too ask: Who are the Herods of our time? What realities dominate our times and imagination? Who would destroy Jesus today because His life and words might interfere with theirs?

Will we be like Matthew's community, who, when reading this story, were moved by the conviction that real forces for good were set in motion by this child and that a very real opposition stood against him?

In the face of the demonic in this world, will we go where the star, the dream leads us? No one can force us to follow the star and the dream. We Americans don't like to be told: Do this. Don't do that. Yet it is an Epiphany gift to us to be led this way and to respond.

This new year, 2021, new Herods will arise and maybe some old ones will return. Personal Herods who want to destroy our individual lives will come to our inner door or macro-Herods whose selves are so huge that nothing else matters to them. Don't be dismayed.

With Christ on this Epiphany day,

Stand firm.

Listen to the dream.

Go where it tells you.

Do not tarry.

Do not be afraid.

Keep an eye open for the holy alongside you.

Press on beyond distractions.

Pray as you walk and

Stop to pray when you know you need to listen for the voice of God.

When the Magi came to the house where the child was, Matthew tells how they fell on their knees and worshipped him. They believed that this child held the key to the meaning of life. Whether it was their original intention or not, the Magi left gifts that drew attention to his authority, divinity and humanity. In leaving these gifts, the Magi accepted that the newborn king was not what they expected. What gifts will we offer from our inner treasure trove?

If from a human viewpoint, Epiphany celebrates the human search for God, from God's viewpoint, Epiphany celebrates that God can be found. I wish you a year of heartfelt searching, finding, recognizing and rejoicing. God is more powerful than any Herod who comes our way.