

The Epiphany – Year C – January 6, 2010 - Homily
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12
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It seems fitting on this Epiphany night to begin with the stars. Doubly so in this beautiful mountain area where the stars are so present with us, lighting up the night sky, like glistening jewels. When my good friend Claire and her sister Evie were visiting recently, we went for a night walk to look at the stars. We looked and kept on looking. Evie, a city girl, was particularly awestruck. She said that she'd never seen anything so beautiful in her whole life, and the memory would be very precious for her. Perhaps inspired by the mysterious star that led the Magi to King Herod and then to Jesus, poets across the centuries have written eloquently about the stars. We have sent men and women to explore the heavens, and no doubt at some time, such adventures foreseen by the creators of Star Trek, Star Wars, and movies like Avatar will become a reality. Philip James Bailey says this about the starry heavens, "What are ye orbs? The words of God? The Scriptures of the skies?" Good questions indeed!

While it is wonderful to look up at the stars, it is also important to be grounded in reality. The foreign Magi, or wise men, very unwisely find their way to King Herod's court, and ask for final directions to the newborn King of the Jews. Herod is a paranoid despot who rules tyrannically, and who seemingly murders without conscience. Although the foreign gentiles probably did not know it, any mention of a rival king was more than enough to send Herod into a frenzy of fear. And when Herod was frightened, well the text tells us, "and all Jerusalem with him." Meaning that when Herod was frightened, all of Jerusalem better be scared for their lives. Herod calls for his chief priests and scribes who are the experts in the scriptures to ask what prophecy tells of the location of Messiah's birth. They tell him Bethlehem of Judah. It is interesting that the Magi's astronomical observations only brought them so far. They still needed the exact location from scripture, and more specifically from the prophet Micah. It is also interesting that those who had the scriptures all along, and who should have been preparing and anticipating the birth of Messiah were not even aware that He had been born in the little town of Bethlehem just a few miles away from Jerusalem. Fear can keep many things hidden from our eyes. We will leave Herod for now, just as the Magi did. Nonetheless we remain aware that Herod's evil will command the infamous slaughter of the innocents when he realizes that the Magi are not coming back to identify the threat to this pretender's claim to power and a throne.

St. Augustine once wrote, "Christ was not born because the star shone forth, but it shone forth because Christ was born; we should say not that the star was fate for Christ, but that Christ was fate for the star." We don't know whether the star that the Magi observed was a supernova, a comet or an extraordinary conjunction of planets. The star that led to Jesus and his mother Mary may even have been just an ordinary star that the Magi had the wisdom to see in a new way. Later Jesus would constantly say of Himself and His mission that it is for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. Since any method of predicting or forecasting future events was viewed as suspicious at best by the Israelites, we can be sure that the Gospel writer offers no endorsement of the Magi's methods, only the appropriateness of what they have come to do before Jesus, our Lord and King. As St. Augustine said, the star shone forth, a mere reflection of the true Light of the world, in celebration of its Creator,

Jesus Christ. All begins with Christ, and Christ is the final destiny for all of God's children.

The Magi find Jesus beneath His star. On entering the house, they fall on their knees before this little child and his mother and offer their gifts in homage to the Messiah of the whole world. What a strange and incongruous sight they must have made, these exotic visitors from foreign lands, in the humble abode of a teenage peasant and her child. Not exactly a palace, and yet the Magi do not hesitate to recognize and pay homage to Jesus as Messiah and King. There are many stories of what the gifts might mean: gold for a king; frankincense as a symbol of worship to God; and myrrh, a symbol of His difficult life and untimely death. Yet it is probably more realistic to believe that these foreigners simply brought what was most precious from their own countries to honor the newborn King – nothing more, and nothing less. We know that God's gift of our salvation cannot be bought, and you and I having nothing that we could possibly give that is not already God's own, except for one thing. You and I have only our selves. In love and gratitude it is our free gift of our self offered back to God that marks us as Christ's own forever. Just as the Magi did, we too give what is most precious to us and pay homage to Christ in our gifts of love and service to the Lord.

T.S. Eliot's poem, *Journey of the Magi*, speaks of what the Magi may have thought and experienced in their journey to see the Lord and afterwards. Towards the end of the poem he writes, "Were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was Birth, certainly... but ... this Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death." He continues, "We returned to our places... but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods." There is no doubt that a personal encounter with Messiah is life changing. In our own baptism, we die with Christ, and are raised to a new life, born again as children of God. These gentiles believed, and in their faith were born to a new life, where they could hear God speak to them in dreams, leading them to safety by a new path. In Christ, it is no different for you and for me, or for any who come to Messiah in faith. Our lives in Christ lead us to new and sometimes difficult paths. We too see with different eyes, and can no longer feel at ease with false gods, and the lies of the world's pretenders to power. You and I are strangers and sojourners in this world, our souls yearning for rest and reconciliation with our Lord Jesus. In Christ, our lives are imbued with new meaning and purpose. As it was for the Magi, nothing can remain the same. When the world weighs heavily, we too should remember to look up at the stars to broaden our vision and give thanks to God. And may the Lord always answer our prayers by giving us the strength and courage to share the true Light that dwells in our hearts and our home. The light that is God's gift to each of us, and our own Epiphany.

Amen.