

**2 Christmas – Year A – January 2, 2011**  
**Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12**  
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In Mary Oliver's poem titled *Coming to God: First Days*, she writes, "Lord, I would run for you, loving the miles for your sake. I would climb the highest tree to be that much closer. Lord, I will learn also to kneel down into the world of the invisible, the inscrutable and the everlasting. Then I will move no more than the leaves of a tree on a day of no wind, bathed in light, like the wanderer who has come home at last and kneels in peace, done with all unnecessary things; every motion; even words." (End quote). Oliver writes as one who is new to faith in God, even as she struggles to find meaning in life after the death of her partner of over forty years. She sounds as excited as the Magi who come to find the newborn king of the Jews.

Liturgically speaking we're only a few days from the Epiphany of Our Lord and our Gospel reading reflects the questions: what is revealed and how are we to respond? Oliver has found in worship the wonder of God, and the strength to move through her sorrow into spiritual growth. Her Epiphany moment is the revelation that coming to worship God really does fill us with what John calls "grace upon grace". Roswell C. Long describes worship as the way to liberate our personalities "by giving a new perspective to life ... by bringing into [our lives] the virtues of humility, loyalty, devotion and rightness of attitude ... refreshing and reviving the spirit."

Contrary to popular hymns like "We Three Kings", there is no indication in the Gospel reading of the precise number of Magi who travelled from the East first to Jerusalem, and then on to Bethlehem. We simply conclude that there are three visiting dignitaries, because of the three gifts that they present to Jesus: gold, a gift fit for a king; frankincense, worthy of a divine offering; and myrrh, a spice used in burial, and a prophetic reminder of Jesus' destiny. Each of these gifts is also symbolic of our own response to the Christ child. Gold is a symbol of purity and virtue; frankincense represents worship; and myrrh, sacrifice and suffering. What is remarkable about the journey of the Magi is that they are gentiles; following God's created light shining in the heavens, and fixed above *the* Light of the world. The visiting Magi's gifts then are also recognition that Jesus, who is both Light and Life, will be the deliverer of all nations.

Since King Herod's brutal reputation no doubt extended beyond the confines of Jerusalem and Judea, we have to ask why the Magi go to Jerusalem at all. It seems like a really stupid idea to go and tell the current king of the Jews that they have seen the heavenly announcement of his successor. Given that Herod's penchant for murder has extended to even his own children, one might have anticipated yet another violent response to this news. The Gospel reading tells it like this, "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." You bet that all Jerusalem was frightened! However, the Magi **had** to stop in Jerusalem, because they needed directions. Herod calls the priests and scribes to inquire where, according to the prophets, the birth of the Messiah is to occur. Ironically, the ones who have the Scriptures and who should have been eagerly anticipating and looking out for the birth of the shepherd king are also the ones who are not actively seeking Him. They provide the Magi with the Scriptural prophecy, and Herod points them in the direction of Bethlehem, with a hearty farewell. He claims that he too wants to pay homage to the newborn king, but secretly he plans to order the slaughter of all the children under two years of age. The Magi have travelled far in order to worship the Messiah. Herod's response is to kill in order to keep his tenuous hold on power all for himself. Jesus the true King will rule by faith and grace, finally defeating sin and death through his own death and resurrection, for the life of the world.

As the Magi now continue their journey to Bethlehem, we'll take a short interlude to explore the broader context of Matthew's Gospel connections, which will offer their own revelations for our prayerful consideration. Matthew's account of Jesus' birth connects Jesus to Moses and the hugely important experiences of Israel. Moses is the great prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures to whom God gives the Law. The next connection is God's revelation to Joseph through various dreams. This is a key part of Matthew's

extended birth narrative, reminding us of Joseph the dreamer sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. Then there's the link between the evil Pharaoh who kills the Israelite children out of fear, and the evil King Herod who orders the murder of the children of Bethlehem for much the same reason. It is Moses, rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, who rediscovers his Hebrew roots and is called by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. The Exodus is the greatest formational event in the history of Israel, and therefore in our own Judeo-Christian story. It is Pharaoh's refusal to allow the Israelites to worship God that begins the great exodus to freedom and the Promised Land. The Ten Commandments bring worship of God and only God under the Law for all the faithful. In Matthew chapter 4, Satan tempts Jesus to gain the world by bowing down and worshipping him instead of God. Even at the end of the Revelation to John, there is the command to "Worship only God!" (Revelation 22:9). Worship is central to God's grand narrative, and worshipping God is still an integral part of our lives of faith.

The structure of our liturgy, our worship of the Lord, *is* like poetry in action. In *Leaves From a Spiritual Notebook*, Dwight Bradley describes worship like this. "For worship is a thirsty land crying out for rain, It is a candle in the act of being kindled, It is a drop in quest of the ocean... It is a voice in the night calling for help, It is a soul standing in awe before the mystery of the universe... It is time flowing into eternity... [one] climbing the altar stairs to God." The first thing the Magi do when they find Jesus is to kneel and worship Him. Both of these acts come before they offer their gifts to the Lord. Indeed, in one sense they have offered the most important gift first – that is, themselves – before giving their less important material gifts from the world. To pay homage is an act of submission before a person of dignity, or great authority. It also describes our proper attitude towards God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The Magi kneeling is an authentic expression of their relationship to Jesus. Their act affirms that Jesus is the Son of God. Let's remember, the Magi are important dignitaries from their own countries, yet they kneel before the Christ child. This is not a relationship of equals, but rather the true King over those under His rule, the Creator over His creatures, the redeemer and the redeemed.

These days, we talk about our stewardship in terms of time, talent and treasure. God speaks of stewardship primarily in terms of worship. Why would that be? Perhaps it is as Oliver suggests so that we can be truly at peace, and be done with the unnecessary things of the world. Perhaps it is also as Long says, for us to gain a deeper understanding of true humility and devotion, in order to receive God's gift of refreshment in body, mind and spirit. This is so that we can know why we desire to give of ourselves, in response to God's immeasurable grace. Maybe it is also a part of knowing why we gather in community to worship God together, to support one another, and to share our spiritual gifts for the mutual benefit and building up of the Body of Christ. According to Kathleen Norris, "The worshipping body is not a gathering of like-minded people, or those with a high degree of faith or knowledge concerning spiritual matters; ... it resembles Christ's ragged band of disciples... a diverse group with remarkable variance in personalities and attitudes toward Jesus.... In worship, disparate people seek a unity far greater than the sum of themselves, but [have little] control over how, or if, this happens. [Almost] recklessly, we let loose with music, ... hymns, psalms, canticles, and prayers. We cast the Word of God out into the world, into each human heart."

That too is how we will leave this little slice of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Word of God *is* in the world, and in our hearts. The Magi worship Him, and go home changed, never again to follow the same paths as their journeys continue. We are also gathered to worship God, and we too are changed by God's greatest revelation to the world, in Christ Jesus our Lord and savior. Just like the Magi, we begin a New Year and a new part of our journey of faith, spiritual growth, and transformation. May the Lord bless us all with health, strength, and new life in Him. Happy New Year everyone!

Amen.