

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Bill Moore

Open a bible to Matthew's gospel, light a candle beside it, and place images of the magi nearby.

LEADER: God of the galaxies, black holes, and nights, Being that holds us in darkness and in light,

ALL: We wander, we wonder where we are. Journey with us on toward the star.

LEADER: Our cosmos unfolds over billions of years to this moment, giving us the light of human consciousness and the light of God's revelation in Jesus.

ALL: Our lives are a journey into communion in God with all that is.

My friend Darwin lives in the country. He's a teacher, but sometimes wishes he were a farmer. Darwin says that once he was in a "visioning" workshop where the leader asked participants to close their eyes and imagine the happiest, most wonderful experience they could think of.

What came to Darwin's mind was the image of a great gathering at a farm. His friends, neighbors, and many people that he did not even know were working together with him to bring in the crops, enjoying each other's company,

and celebrating the bountiful harvest.

Darwin's vision comes to mind when I think of Epiphany. Sunday's feast falls in the depth of winter, not at harvest time. But Epiphany celebrates a similar vision—the great mystery and message that people of every race and nation, near and far, known and unknown are welcome to share and rejoice together in the boundless abundance of God's merciful kindness and the salvation God's Son Jesus brings.

Epiphany's three magi stand in for all of us who do not share the Jewish identity of Jesus and his first followers. The magi reach out to the newborn king of the Jews and travel far to pay him homage. Mary and Joseph welcome them and accept their gifts.

The message? Jesus is not just for Jews. He's not just for Christians either. The peace and love Jesus brings into this world and the forgiveness and reconciliation he brings about through his death and resurrection are for everyone.

Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker that prays, "God bless the whole world—no exceptions." On Epiphany, we joyfully affirm our belief and thanks that God does exactly that.

- What is the happiest, most wonderful experience you can imagine?
- If you were going to make up a bumper sticker or billboard slogan to express the meaning of Epiphany, what would it say?



GOSPEL

Where is the newborn king?



NARRATOR 1: After Jesus' birth in Bethlehem of Judea during the reign of King Herod, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.

MAGI: Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.

NARRATOR 2: When King Herod heard this, he became greatly disturbed, and with him all Jerusalem. He summoned all the chief priests and scribes of the people.

HEROD: Where is the messiah to be born?

PRIESTS, SCRIBES: In Bethlehem of Judea. Here is what the prophet has written.

MICAH: And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.

NARRATOR 1: Herod called the magi aside and found out from them the exact time of the star's appearance. Then he sent them

to Bethlehem with these instructions.

HEROD: Go and search carefully for the child. When you have found him, bring me word so that I may go and offer him homage, too.

NARRATOR 2: After their audience with the king, the magi set out. The star that they had observed at its rising went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

NARRATOR 1: On entering the house, they found the child with Mary, his mother. They knelt down and paid him homage. Then they opened their coffers and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

NARRATOR 2: Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they returned to their own country by another road.

Matthew 2.1-12

has come also for the rest of humankind. That is the meaning of the main Christmas story in Matthew's gospel, the visit of the magi. Jesus is not only king of the Jews, but the hope of the Gentiles, all the non-Jewish peoples of the earth—us.

Only Matthew tells of the wise visitors from the East. The story introduces a major theme of his gospel: The inclusion of the Gentiles in the promises of Jesus.

● Name Gentile peoples of the earth from whom group members descend. What do you know about how your people first journeyed to faith in Jesus?

The word *magi* has the same root as the word *magic*. It was used of people thought to have more than human knowledge. In his story, Matthew characterizes the magi as students of the stars, interpreters of dreams, and worshipful seekers of the new messiah. Their wisdom manifests itself in several ways:

- They identify a particular star and choose to follow it.
- When lost (husbands, please note), they ask directions from credible sources.
- They discern the identity of the child and pay him homage.
- They heed the dream warning and do not return to Herod.

The nations journey to Jesus.

Matthew's nativity narrative does not focus on Jesus' actual birth. Who Jesus is concerns this evangelist more than how Jesus was born.

For this reason Matthew opens his gospel by tracing Jesus' genealogy from Abraham, the founding father of God's chosen people, through King

David to Joseph, Mary's espoused husband. An angel instructs Joseph in a dream to name the child *Jesus*, which means *God's salvation*. This child is Emmanuel, God-with-us, who fulfills Isaiah's ancient prophecy (7.14).

But Jesus is not only the leader/savior God promised the chosen people. Jesus

Most remarkably, the magi are not distracted or deterred by the fact that the messiah they seek is not one of their people, nor they of his.

This would have been a critical point for early readers of Matthew. In the 50 years between Jesus' death and resurrection and the gospel's writing, Gentile believers had come to outnumber Jewish Christians in Matthew's community. This was a source of tension as well as creative ferment.

Jews and Gentiles had to tolerate and, where possible, integrate their different traditions, forms of worship, and ways of understanding Jesus. To sustain the unity of their diverse community, they had to recognize that the good news and saving grace Jesus brought was for all of them. Both groups had an equal claim to him as their ruler and shepherd.

Matthew's Christmas story affirms this: Jesus is the Jewish messiah and people who are not Jewish are eager and welcome to honor and follow him. Who you are or where you are from is irrelevant.

As Paul writes to the Ephesians, "In Christ Jesus the Gentiles are now co-heirs with Jews, members of the same body and sharers of the promise

through the preaching of the gospel" (3.6).

● **How would Matthew respond to anti-Semitism today?**

● **What insight and guidance does the Epiphany story offer regarding tensions among Christians, Muslims, and Jews today?**

The tensions that early Christians felt and dealt with remain with us in our faith communities and in the world at large. Exclusiveness is a natural human inclination. We want to belong. Life is easier with people who are like us, who think the way we think, and do things the way we do. Welcoming strangers challenges us to take first steps we feel unsure how to make so we miss out on widening our experience.

When it gets down to the nitty-gritty of food, water, clothing, shelter, jobs, and other vital necessities, the drive to "take care of our own" grows even stronger. The notion that "we all do better, when we all do better" is attractive until there's not enough to go around.

But there is no mistaking the message of the Epiphany readings: God is inclusive and

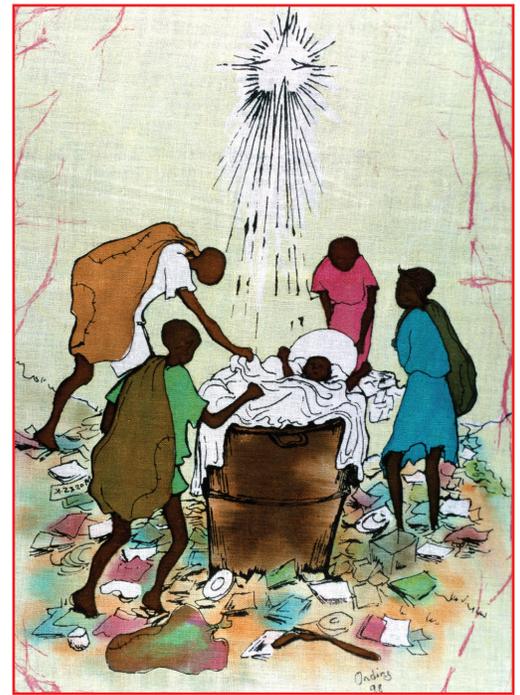


photo: Wittman

wants us to be so in matters of faith and worship and in managing the goods of this world. Jew or Gentile, Christian or Muslim, native or alien, black, brown, yellow, red or white, male or female, straight or gay—whoever we are and wherever we are from—we are all invited and welcome to visit the child of Bethlehem and to hear and receive the good news of peace and forgiveness and reconciliation that he brings.

"Lord, every nation on earth will adore you," sings Sunday's responsorial psalm. It continues, "For God shall save the poor when they cry and the needy who are helpless. God will have pity on the weak and save the lives of the poor." That's our work, too, by the grace of God.

● **What have you learned from people of other religions about what they value about Jesus?**

● **What experience have you had of working with people of other religions on common causes?**

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Visit catholicclimatecovenant.org and read the U.S. Catholic Climate Declaration, which explains the group continues to work to meet the the goals of the United Nations Paris 2015 agreement. The group continues the work Pope Francis initiated in his exhortation *Laudato Si'*.

- How can we in our parish faith community become more inclusive of people from other nations and cultures? How can we better help people who are poor and needy?



Nations will walk by Jesus' light.

In the first reading for Epiphany we hear intimations of the magi's visit in the opening verses of Isaiah 60. The prophet Isaiah envisions Israel's sons and daughters returning from exile in Babylon. Their faith and restoration from suffering make them a people who reflect God's glory and give light to other nations.

God's saving power enlightens and redeems women and men of all nations. We hear Isaiah's message in a world increasingly driven by tribal divisions. We hear it as citizens of a nation of immigrants growing increasingly fearful of new migrants crossing our borders.

Isaiah waxes eloquent, imagining masses of immigrants and caravans of traders from Arabia and Sheba, streaming into Zion. The prophet sees cause for excitement in Israel's rebuilding, "for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, and the wealth of nations shall be brought to you."

How different Isaiah's vision is from the guarded view we often take of the others who wish to join our religious or our geographic communities. Isaiah sees an economics of

abundance in people's coming together that challenges the boundaries we set out of fear and our economics of scarcity.

God's glory shines in Israel.

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem!
Your light has come,
God's glory shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth,
and thick clouds cover the peoples.
But upon you God shines, and over
you appears God's glory.
Nations shall walk by your light,
kings by your shining radiance.

Raise your eyes and look about;
they all gather and come to you.
Your sons come from afar,
and your daughters
in the arms of their nurses.

Then you shall be radiant
at what you see,
your heart shall throb and overflow,
for the riches of the sea shall be
emptied out before you;
the wealth of nations shall be
brought to you.
Caravans of camels shall fill you,
dromedaries from Midian and
Ephah; all from Sheba shall come
bearing gold and frankincense,
and proclaiming the praises
of the Holy One.

Isaiah 60:3-6

- What gifts do you bring from your family and ethnic background for building human community?

- When and where have you experienced diverse peoples coming together to worship? What have you gained from such experiences?

PRAY

LEADER: Close your eyes and reflect for a few minutes on what star, what light leads you on through the long nights of winter in the northern hemisphere. Think how you want to complete the statement, "I see a star rising in..."

LEADER: In Christ Jesus the Gentiles are now coheirs with the Jews, members of the same body and sharers of the promise.

EACH: I see a star rising in...

ALL: All peoples share the promise of Jesus.



Bill Moore holds masters degrees in philosophy, theology, and adult education and works in the labor movement.

Make the **ONLINE RETREAT**, "Finding God," at our website—goodgroundpress.com. This eight-part retreat can be done alone or with a group. It reflects on how God calls us to holiness and how we find God in creation, relationships, work, hospitality, and leisure.