

The Epiphany – Visitors at Christmas...

Often at Christmas we have visitors come to stay. Family and friends come from afar and their presence adds an additional joy to the season. Gathering people together is part of how our society celebrates Christmas, not only for those who hold Christian beliefs – relationships with family members and close friends are celebrated and much feasting takes place.

As it happens, the two gospel accounts that describe the birth of the infant Jesus both include visitors to the newborn and his parents. In Luke's gospel, there is an announcement by an angel to shepherds in their fields that the Messiah has been born (Luke 2:8-20). Of interest, the angel does not tell the shepherds to go and visit Jesus; rather, they are told what the scene of the birth will look like: *you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger*. The shepherds are so taken by what the angel has said they decide among themselves to visit the newborn Messiah.



Matthew's gospel also has visitors

to the infant Jesus. This time, rather than lowly shepherds who lack any social standing, the visitors are from the highest level of society: *wise men from the East* (Matt 2:1-7). The interpretation of who these men were is that they are likely to have been wealthy (they had treasure chests with them), and they may have been rulers (hence, the three kings of Christmas carols). Tradition has assumed there were three, but the gospel makes no mention of how many there were – the assumption is that as they presented three gifts, there may have been three of them.

Who these visitors are matters. It is not an accident that Luke's gospel records the announcement of the birth of the Messiah being made to shepherds. The expectation was that the Messiah would be a king of some kind, therefore wealthy and powerful. The message of Luke's account is that this isn't the way God works – the birth of the Messiah is good news for all humankind, regardless of social standing, riches, etc. Equally, it is not an accident that the wise men discern the rising star that signals the Messiah's birth. As wealthy men, they would be of high social standing, and they would have also expected the Messiah to have a regal context around his birth. Yet, they realise on arrival at the scene of the birth that this newborn, in humble circumstances, is the Messiah. They kneel and pay homage, and confer gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.



Regardless of who you are, Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, respected or despised, this lowly newborn is the Messiah for all humankind, indeed, for all creation. Jane Williams writes about the experience of the wise men:

(after visiting Herod), the wise men step into the clear, white light of the star they have followed for so long. It is as clear as it has been throughout their journey, and it stops with perfect clarity over one house. There is no mistaking its intentions. ... when they see the baby they are 'overwhelmed with joy'. He is not at all what they were expecting. He is clearly not a king, but a perfectly ordinary baby in a simple house with a peasant mother. But the wise men see, at last, as though the light from the star has finally illuminated their inner being: they see that here is the end of their quest, and it is glorious. ...

There is something about the wise men that catches our imagination. Although we know so little about them, somehow we are able to identify with them. ... At the crib of Jesus all are welcome, and that is what the wise men tell us. Over the centuries, they have come increasingly to represent everybody. ... They are all of us, called from all over the world to witness the birth of the new, strange king and be changed by it. Jesus' God is not just the possession of people who already know him or of people who are already pure of heart. He draws around the cradle of his new kingdom all kinds of people with all kinds of talents. ...

Whatever our lives have been up until now, as we look at the baby lying in the straw, we can see in him the loving activity of God.



Jane Williams, *Approaching Christmas*, 2005, pp.120-125 excerpts.

A Prayer for the Feast of the Epiphany

I wonder sometimes
 If one of the stars that lit Abraham's night
 Was the one that led the Magi to Jesus.
 A dark canvas speckled by the most generous brush—
 What an improbable promise to an old man.
 But our God has never been daunted by the unlikely, the impossible.
 What a sight for the Magi, too,
 A baby resting on hay, his cries mingled with braying and bleating.
 I like to think they heard in those everyday sounds a holy chorus,
 Saw in that noisy tableau a Creator serenaded by His creation,
 All of it embodied, enfleshed—
 All of it good.
 And when we've left our gifts for this implausible King,
 May we, like the Magi, go home by another way—
 Having encountered the holy,
 May we protect it, guard it,
 Trail its light behind us wherever we go.
 A sacred arc transposed from heaven to earth,
 May we ourselves become the star,
 Leading the way to Emmanuel.
 Amen.

— Cameron Bellm

spirit &
verse



To ponder...

In your Christmas prayer and reflection, how have you sensed the gifts of this season?

And what are the gifts you bring, as the wise men did, to present to the Messiah – the gifts you share daily with the people in your life?

Allow yourself some silent time to read over the gospel accounts of the nativity, now that the busyness of Christmas is behind you...

Images:

Angel & Shepherds: Arlington St Unitarian and Universalist Church, Boston.

Magi: Conception Abbey

Shepherds in adoration: Murillo

Infant sleeping: Garratt Advent Calendar, 2020