January 6, 2019 The Epiphany

All Saints’ Church Year C

Isaiah 60:1-6,9 Ephesians 3:1-12

Psalm 72 Matthew 2:1-12

We follow the light of Christ’s Love. Amen

A good friend of mine who is a Jesuit priest called me one day very distraught. The local priest who took Eucharist to residents at the Retirement Home where my friend’s mother was living refused to take her Communion any longer.

“Why not,” my friend asked?

“She can’t swallow or focus; she doesn’t understand what she’s receiving; what’s the use.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” my friend replied. “None of us fully understand how the bread and wine are gifts. None of us. That’s the whole point. Understanding is not a criterion. My mother has been receiving communion on a daily basis since she was a young adult. Almost 70 years! Please place the bread and wine in front of her, say the words of consecration, and touch the host dipped in wine to her lips, and let the sacrament have its mysterious way with her. You’re not the gift-giver; God is.”

My friend did not think he “got through to the priest,” but he indeed got through to me. (This conversation happened over 30 years ago).

I think of this story often, especially at announcements when I gesture to the altar and invite all gathered to receive communion and say “God beckons all of us to receive the bread of life. “Wayfarer, Wanderer, Worshipper…Come one, come all.” This invitation cannot be extended against the backdrop of who’s in and who’s out. In God’s world, there is no such thing.

Christianity by its very nature is inclusive. We don’t have the option to be otherwise. It’s by God’s own mandate and design. We are to honor each other’s dignity. We are to see in each other the face of God, with no hesitation. There are no strangers, just people we have not yet met. We are all invited to sit at God’s banquet and to feast; to come just as we are. And to be hospitable. The feast invites all people, many of whom we do not understand, many who are so unlike us. Does not matter. If anything, this “not knowing” makes it all the more interesting to discover each other. Sometimes it takes work. Maybe it was designed that way! Diversity as the only path to true Unity.

No one is left behind or cut out or made less than. Jesus’ life and death and resurrection made sure of that.

This invitation is rooted in the telling of the story of these magi coming from afar to honor and bless the New King of the World. This is our starting point toward this radical inclusivity, this deep resounding dignity, and this profound miraculous mystery.

Funny thing, Jesus born in the middle of nowhere, yet, as the story unfolds, his cradle becomes the Center of the World. Something that will cradle the whole cosmos, past, present, and future. Like the magi, we are all invited to kneel with this Incarnate Love born into the world. A Love that is designed to be found.

We don’t know who these magi are; we don’t know their identities (though they have been given names throughout the centuries). We don’t know their number, their gender, their race, their professions, their economic status, nor their reasons for their journey. They are cosmically “Other,” exponentially so.

I like to imagine them coming from the priestly caste of their society, educated with the knowledge of the stars and the planets and their orbits, scientists of their day, who have a firm grasp of their intellectual capacity, but who also trust in their hearts and wills and in the mystery of following a star. I like thinking of them as philosophers, yet also willing to follow a dream, their own intuition, a song rising from deep within, to go beyond their own understanding to deepen their lives. In other words, I like to imagine them as Wise.

Yet, who knows?

And where do they come from? Somewhere in the East… Persia, Kurdistan, Arabia, India, maybe China… we have no idea. We do know that they are willing to cross boundaries, to trek into uncharted territory, to risk tense expectation, to be watchful and alert and to bear gifts, gifts to a baby born in simplicity, who they believe is True North, like the Star set in the sky to help humanity find its way.

From the beginning, this story pits this Newborn against Herod the Great, Israel’s reigning king. The story’s dramatic energy is rooted in this tension. As soon as the magi enter Jerusalem, they ask, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” This question unnerves King Herod, as it threatens his own kingship. He secretly calls for them, as if he is the author of this story’s direction. He thinks he can use the magi as a ploy to get what he wants. Yet, all he does is release the story that will delegitimize his kingship of deceit and ruthlessness, and reveal him as a murderer of innocents, while the other King… the King of Love is being honored.

It’s a great story, told so well. It ends with the guiding star, the warning dream, setting the magi on an alternative route to return home.

Of course, the magi have been on an alternative route since they began their journey. I like to think of all of us gathered here as being on an alternative route. It’s part of Faith’s mandate- to walk by another way.

We gather here together from all different walks of life and meaning to claim that Love matters. We are walking together on this terrain, rejecting the other routes, often designed by society, which carry you into becoming only a consumer, a commodity, or a casualty.

By walking together, we are rejecting all the clamor, all the noise that claims you need to be beautiful, rich, successful, thin, with the right friends, the right cars, the right zip-code, the right iPhone, focused only on the kingdom of your self-preservation…. Instead we are walking the alternative route of being magi, bearing gifts and receiving gifts, and believing that there is an alternative way set by God’s dream for us.

And that we, like the magi, are willing to leave our safe and secure homes, however they may be designed, and risk unknown terrain to be found by Love.

We believe in the alternative route set by God’s dream for us, willing to cross boundaries, to trek into unchartered territory, to risk tense expectation, to be watchful and alert and to bear gifts… as we walk toward a Love that wants to be found.

I like thinking of Jesus as a Love that wants to be found, a love that beckons all of us to follow his star. It doesn’t mean that it’s going to be easy. That’s the Epiphany part. The “aha” part.

Believing in Jesus Christ as the North Star of Love, a love that will guide us, means we are going to meet our own King Herods along the way, whether they come to us through cruelty, madness, illness, injustice, addictions, loss or confusion. We can’t avoid this part. Believing in Jesus’ love and our promise to live by Radical Hospitality is also to accept suffering, and a willingness to walk right into the darkness, and to trust that God will guide us to where we need to go.

Trust while in the darkness- that’s the hard part… the really hard part.

We will lose our way sometimes, get discouraged and wish that we just knew more about what’s going to happen. Sometimes this mystery stuff gets tiring; it’s so relentless in its presence.

That’s why we gather together under this beautiful nave. We hold each other up in front of the altar of life and death and receive the gift of bread and wine, the gift of blessing, the gift of Mystery.

And in this gathering, we remind each other that it’s the mystery of what’s next that keeps us united. It’s the mystery of not knowing that keeps us humble and open to compassion and to alternative routes. It’s the mystery of The Holy Spirit settling into our hearts and inspiring us that keeps up hopeful and emboldened to live by trust.

We are the Magi, gift-givers. And as we receive Love, a love designed to be found, we also become gifts of Radical Hospitality, as precious as gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Amen.

(The Rev. Jamie L. Hamilton)