

The Welcoming Face of God

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Psalm 72
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12
Ephesians 3:1-12

This birth story from Matthew is one we treasure and ponder, maybe like Mary, “pondering all these things in her heart,” as Luke says in his version of the birth story. There is a measure of mystery in the story that is intriguing again and again, even if we can recite the story by heart. Of course birth is always a bit mysterious, how a third, separate person comes from the joining of two people months previous. We know how it happens, but a birth can still cause awe and tears of joy.

Even though we know the Matthew account, we often portray the story as conflated with Luke’s version, as we did in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* here 2 weeks ago. Matthew gives us a child in a house, not a stable, and he is really more of a toddler than a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. The only king in Matthew’s story is the evil Herod. Matthew doesn’t say how many wise astrologers came from the east, but since three gifts are mentioned we imagine they must have divided up the gifts equally amongst themselves, thus the three foreign visitors.

Still, if it didn’t all happen quite the way we have seen it portrayed in pageants and movies there continues to be meaning and mystery here. And when we read all of the texts the lectionary puts together for Epiphany — from Psalm 72, Isaiah 60, Matthew 2, and Ephesians 3 — we see that while light and kings are a definite theme, that’s not all that is happening in these texts.

We read that for generations, really in almost every generation, the people have been waiting for someone to save them, for someone who will welcome and unite the whole world. Isaiah holds out the vision: “Nations shall come to your light; Kings will come to the brightness of your dawn.” This “*star of wonder, star*

of light, star with royal beauty bright” calls to all people. In Luke’s version it is to the dirty Jewish shepherds, in Matthew the clean, regal Gentiles. This pretty much covers the continuum; the light is good news for everyone.

It is not only Isaiah who holds out this vision. In Psalm 72 we read this hymn to the new king:

The kings of Tarshish and the isles will offer gifts,
the kings of Arabia and Sheba will bring tribute.

¹¹All rulers will pay homage and all the nations will serve your anointed.

Your anointed one will rescue the poor when they cry out,
and the oppressed when there is no one to help them.

Your chosen one will take pity
on the lowly and the poor,
and will save their lives.

Your chosen one will rescue them all
from violence and oppression
and will treat their blood as precious.

This is part of the story the Jews have been telling their children and their children’s children; people will come from all lands, the poor will be saved, the oppressed will be rescued from violence. What a wild and impossible idea. It must be for another era, something to long for but how could it ever be experienced in this world?

But Jesus comes along and lives out this vision. As his followers look back on his life, they marvel that this vision of what God wants for the world was coming to fruition right before their very eyes.

As the years pass after Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, his followers start to understand in a *new* way that this vision *is* for everyone, not just the Jews. This vision of peace, of living in light despite the darkness, this really is now for all nations, for all people. The writer of Ephesians 3 says it this way:

For I Paul — a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — am sure that you have heard of God’s grace, of which I was made a steward on your behalf; this mystery, as I have briefly described it, was given to me by revelation.

When you read this, you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was unknown to the people of former ages but is now revealed by the Spirit to the holy apostles and prophets. That mystery is that the Gentiles are heirs, as are we; members of the Body, as are we; and partakers of the promise of Jesus the Messiah through the Good News, as are we.

The followers of the Jesus way had the nerve to claim that what they observed and experienced was part of what the prophets and psalmist had been writing about all along. Not only that, this vision was for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike! This kind of talk created the need for conference meetings, got Paul imprisoned and got plenty of the Jesus followers in a heap of trouble. But we keep telling this story as Christians. God will draw all people to Godself.

As I read the story this time, especially in combination with the lectionary texts, a phrase kept coming to me: “build it and they will come.”

Some of you may remember the movie, *Field of Dreams*, from 20 years ago. Kevin Costner plays Ray Kinsella, a California hippie turned Iowa farmer. One day while working in the cornfield he hears a voice that says, “build it and he will come.” He puzzles over this, but eventually understands that he is to plow under a large portion of his corn and build a baseball field. Of course everyone thinks he is totally nuts, a bit like Noah building an ark during the dry season. But Kinsella builds the ball field and while he rapidly goes bankrupt, waits to see what will happen next.

Eventually the voice leads Ray across the country to find people, present and past, who have unfulfilled baseball wishes. He brings them together on his baseball field to live out their dreams. And in so doing he begins to live out his own dreams.

Plenty of communities try it, but to me baseball as the almighty unifier, as savior, seems a stretch. But maybe it is no more farfetched than the strange project on incarnation — a Jewish baby born to a poor, unwed mother, who is visited and worshipped by Gentile stargazers, whose family becomes refugees to Egypt in order to save their son from an evil, jealous king. And then the boy grows up to be the savior of the world.

This story that we tell over and over again, that we look to as life giving, even lifesaving, is mysterious, fanciful even. The idea that one person, born in the image of God, no — born human and God — can lead people to a new way of life, to a new way of living, to a whole new humanity. Now there is a mysterious vision. It's a promise that is so crazy it has lasted for several thousand years. Followers of the baby turned prophet are ridiculed, persecuted, even killed for believing and following his teachings.

But strangely, despite the persecution, death and resurrection of the prophet, despite persecution and death of the prophet's followers, the vision has lived on. The story keeps getting told, not just in the land where he lived but all over the world.

The peace held out by Isaiah, the psalmist, Jesus, Paul and the gospel writers seems impossible. How can there ever be a peace like this? But we hang onto the dream, even now as it seems to slip through our fingers with renewed violence and bombing in the very land where Jesus was born. How can it be that Isaiah's vision of people coming together, Jesus' model of living, these three faiths that come from this common ancestor, Abraham, how is it that we still don't get it?

By the end of the movie, *Field of Dreams*, the ball field is the playground for eight White Sox players from 50 years previous who had been banned for cheating. Other players show up simply because they have missed playing ball since they've been dead for 50 years. He built it and they came.

Ray and his family can see these ball players; in fact a favorite family activity is sitting on the homemade bleachers and watching pick up games by these once professional athletes.

But not everyone can see the game. Ray's brother-in-law, Michael, who is more concerned with saving the farm from foreclosure than saving the soul through baseball, can't see the players. His vision is clouded. Michael walks right through the game almost getting beamed in the head by a pitch and he doesn't even know it. Ray followed the voice, he built it and they did come but not everyone can see.

Is this how it is? It is all happening, or at least the possibility, is right there in front of us but some people just don't see the vision; can't see the promised welcome and peace. Some even know the story, the most intimate details, but somehow the mystery of the game eludes them. In the attempt to save the farm, or to save the church, Isaiah's dream, which was held out as a hope and promise for his own time and place, but seems just as pertinent in every age — Isaiah's dream, gets lost, becomes almost invisible.

This Sunday of Epiphany calls us back to this vision, reminds us that time after time, throughout history, God has welcomed all people to the light. God welcomes all people to be part of the story. Of course not everyone chooses to enter into the mystery, not everyone is willing to bow to a child.

There is risk involved with saying we are trying to live out this vision; we are called dreamers, hypocrites, even heretics. Providing a place of worship and work for all people no matter the culture, color, gender, ability, orientation or economic status is not easy or without conflict. We hold out this impractical dream that God welcomes us all. Though thick darkness covers the earth, God's light shines and God's glory can be seen.

May we with the magi find joy in this Jesus and with the writer of Ephesians enter the mystery that the Gentiles are heirs, as are we, to the promise of Jesus the Messiah through the Good News.