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Epiphany, Year A

What do you think of when you hear the word “epiphany”? Do you think of a moment in your own life, or do you think of the definition: a sudden and great revelation or realization? When or how did that definition manifest for you? What was the shape of that moment? Did it burst forth from within you, like giving birth to a new possibility? Was it like the rising of the sun, illuminating any number of things? Was it like the tide, either bringing in something closer to you, or revealing what you couldn't quite see before in its receding? Was it a glimpse, like the crashing and then subsiding of a roaring wave? Or was it something that permanently changed you, reorienting your perspective and approach to life? Was it about a person, family, friend, or foe? Was it about yourself, our world, or people broadly? How did it change you?

I know for myself that there have been so many of those moments that it can be hard to sort them all. Yet I also know that without them I'd bumble about this life, meandering instead of being at least a little focused on my own hopes, goals, and dreams. Perhaps you feel the same. As we've switched from 2019 into 2020 I've been doing a some reminiscing, and the epiphanies are numerous, but I'll tell you one of the more recent ones in a bit, but I want to set it through the lens of our reading from today's Gospel.

Jesus' birth has already happened in Bethlehem, just 5 miles south of Jerusalem, and three magi are seeking him out, led by a star. They are not kings themselves, as they apparently travel as three individuals, something kings would never do, and it's also questionable that they were at all wise, as magi had a reputation for magical sorcery and scams as well as stargazing. No, these are not wise men at all, but they are people who had a somewhat foolish hope of the

world finding redemption, renewal, and a rekindling of human hearts in the form of a child whose star they have read. Mercury was clearly in retrograde, because news gets out about these foolish magi are cooking up trouble, and the local ruler, Herod, who's been bought off partially by Rome, has gotten word of their foolish quest.

Herod is eager to quash any resistance to his rule or to his Roman clientele, and brings in the magi, who foolishly reveal their quest and destination to this insecure local tyrant. He has designs upon any challenge, even if it comes in the form of a vulnerable child of lowly birth. The magi use Hebrew scripture as proof text of their quest, and knowing the restlessness of the Judeans, always an unruly people to occupying empires, it compels Herod to do something horrendous. We don't get to it in this particular reading today, but upon the foolish magi being warned in a dream not to return to him, Herod launches a plague of death upon all newborn boys in his territory, known as the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, as Mary, Joseph, and the child Jesus escape to Egypt.

Ignore the historicity of this event, this is unlikely to have been real, but stories, regardless of their factuality, always carry truth. The truth that the writer of the gospel of Matthew was trying to convey is very simple: that Jesus' life, from the very beginning, represented a threat to the order in place by those in power. The reason Matthew writes in the slaughter of the Holy Innocents is to hearken back to the beginning of Moses' life in the book of Exodus. When Moses was born, he came into a world in which his people were reviled as resident aliens in Egypt. Moses' people were used as cheap labor by the pharaoh, who also had a policy of killing the first-born male of every Hebrew household in Egypt. Moses' mother placed

him in a basket in the Nile, where he was found by Pharaoh's daughter, who raised the reluctant liberator.

Jesus, according to Matthew, is the fulfillment not only of scriptural prophecy, but is greater even than Moses. Jesus will be such a liberator that all narrow-minded overseers of the status quo will do all within their worldly power to end this disruption of their way. And there's another reason that Matthew's writer would choose foolish magi to be the unwitting messengers of the overturning that Jesus will bring: because it has always been foolish to counter imperial powers with a vision of peace and harmony that is uninterested with the use of brute force. It is foolish to believe that death can be overcome, that the captives can be set free, and that God's love and power walked this world in the form of a peasant with questionable parentage. For Game of Thrones fans, Jesus is essentially the original Jon Snow: his father is not his father, and some shame surrounds his birth and existence, regardless of whether it is warranted or not.

Yes, the foolishness of these magi is their faith that the world can be forever changed by those of little or no status, and thus the contrast is drawn immediately between King Herod and baby Jesus. The sword versus swaddling clothes, armies versus an unarmed baby. And this is only at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, as the contrast between Jesus' vision of the world and that of the Roman Empire and its clients grows more and more.

That same foolishness of the magi is an invitation to us, a vision of the world not determined by things beyond our control, but instead by us taking ownership of the things we can, and work to make them as just, hospitable, loving, and merciful as Jesus would. Whether we believe in a virgin birth or every word of the Nicene Creed isn't really the question God asks. It's

never been a question of blind belief, but it is a question about faithfulness and a type of foolishness.

God asks if we are the kinds of fools who can envision a world without prisoners, captives, and prisons? Can we see a world without lowly births, without more or less fortunate children but just children? Can we see a world without greed and theft, without violence and corruption, without loopholes and convenience at the expense of the wellbeing of others? Can we see a world where all people are valued for their humanity, and not for their credit rating, cars or clothes? Are we foolish enough to live into that vision here and now, without cop-outs, without certainty that it will ever really change? Are we foolish enough to believe that anyone can really make a difference?

[Pause]

One of my most recent epiphanies came in the shape of a photograph. As some of you have heard, our community organizing team helped throw a Las Posadas event here the week before Christmas. For those who are unfamiliar, Las Posadas, literally “the inns,” is a Mexican tradition that celebrates the path of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter, being rejected by many inns until they find the inn that is willing to offer them a place in a stable, the ancient era equivalent of letting you sleep in a parking lot. Las Posadas is marked by singing, food, and fellowship, and we had all of that with about 40 or so of our various neighbors, including a piñata for the kids. One mom asked one of our organizers to take a picture of her family with the piñata before the candy would be liberated. She took the picture, and then the mother explained that she was going to send this photograph of their family to her husband, who is stuck in Mexico, unable to cross the border.

The epiphany came in the shape of that photograph, a couple of kids and a lonely mother, trying to share their joy with a loved one across borders and barriers they did not choose for themselves, but nonetheless they took what love, joy, and gratitude they had in that moment, caught a bit of it, and sent it across all of those boundaries to inspire more love, joy, and gratitude elsewhere. Perhaps it will be the beginning of change in this world, perhaps it is foolish to have faith that it will change anything, but the foolish have always relied on hope and faith to begin change, and it starts with the world that's in front of you.

My prayer for this Epiphany is that we are all so foolish as to have faith that we can not only make a difference, but that each of us can *be* the difference. My prayer is that we do not take a passive stance, but that we are prepared to move faithfully forward with tenacity in the face of doubt and hopelessness. I pray we are all audacious in our visions, and that we live accordingly, this year, and always. No matter the shape of your epiphanies, no matter their form or substance, live your God-given hope and vision for a better world as a faithful fool, because Jesus will live it with you, in your heart, your mind, and your actions.

Arise, shine; for your light has come, for the glory of the Lord has shone upon you.

Amen.