

God's Embrace

Three Kings Day/Epiphany

January 6, 2012

Matthew 2: 1-2

The Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

Let us pray:

Gracious God, how wonderful is your presence among us. God of Hope, God of Love, God of equality, we invite you this morning to allow us to appreciate the miracle of the incarnation and to welcome you each day more and more in our midst.

Happy Three Kings Day, everyone! When I was a little girl in Puerto Rico, this was the most special day of the season, other than Christmas Eve. Santa seldom made it to the Caribbean, but we always knew the Three Kings will arrive and bring us something, if ever so simple. We would prepare the night before in anticipation to their arrival. We would cut grass and leave a bucket full of water for the camels, and for the Kings, we would leave something to eat—not necessary cookies.

We waited for anticipation for the arrivals of the wise men. But, in the story of the wise men, it is they who were looking, and a great sense of anticipation and hope for the child who was born. They were on a quest to find God. Although most nativity scenes include the Magi, the wise men were almost certainly later visitors, coming perhaps as long as two years later after Jesus' birth. But, regardless of the time of their arrival, they most certainly "knelt down and paid him homage."

Some significant elements about this story are worth noting. As the story unfolds in the Gospel, we find that God reaches to the commoner at the bottom -- the shepherds to the Wise men at the top. God reaches to all regardless of economic status, background, religious affiliation.

The wise men came from the East. Commentaries say that they were Magi belonging to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, which paid particular attention to the stars. This priestly caste gained an international reputation for astrology, which was, at that time, highly regarded as a

science. So, these wise men were from the East and practiced other religions -- and God guided them to the Christ.

The wise men came from the places we today call Iraq and Iran. Elizabeth Huey asked the question -- what if we were to have strangers, political leaders, and advisors from those places come to our local congregations?

How did these strangers find their way to the new King of the Jews? They're "sincere and persistent." They recognized the signs that would lead them to God. Commentaries say that as we admire the persistence of the Magi, we must recognize that they not only admire the star, but followed it. Yet, their action is a response to God's invitation.¹

So, we see in this story that God sent a gentle shepherd who shook the powers-that-have been. We hear that a small, new-born baby terrified the strongest rulers. We learn that God's reach of grace went beyond obstacles. We learn that a great light has dawned, a light that draws all people and calls us to live our lives illuminated by its truth.

Isaiah 60:

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

That's what the Epiphany season is about: There is a light breaking through for all of us, and if you know what it is like to sit in the darkness, you will hear the call to arise.

Who is this God, who now enters into our midst? Who is this God, who now actually shows us God's face -- the face of a child? God's glory is no longer far off in some heavenly realm, experienced as a cloud, but it is calling all people together.

¹ Interpreters Bible, Volume VII

And these days, I must confess to you, I sense God reaching out to embrace me and this congregation in new ways. I have seen the light of the star in each and every one of you. I have seen the balm of the Holy Spirit reaching inside many broken hearts to heal wounds that only the Spirit of God can heal. I have seen the power of God's embrace infuse many who were hopeless with hopefulness. I have felt the arms of God around us in indescribable ways, and in my witnessing, I can only say: *Ciertamente Dios Esta con nosotros...Certainly God is in this place.*

Yet, we may stand here, today, looking at the star...thinking about that God who called all to come near and find God. I hope that we decide to follow the light. I hope that we make up for those did not answer the call

Dorothy Day wrote: "In Christ's life, there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. The shepherds did it; their hurrying to the crib atoned for the people who would flee from Christ. The wise men did it; their journey across the world made up for those who refused to stir one hand's breadth from the routine of their lives to go to Christ. Even the gifts the wise men brought have in themselves an obscure recompense and atonement for what would follow later in this Child's life. For they brought gold, the king's emblem, to make up for the crown of thorns that he would wear; they offered incense, the symbol of praise, the make up for the mockery and the spitting; they gave him myrrh, to heal and soothe, and he was wounded from head to foot and no one bathed his wounds. The women at the foot of the cross did it too, making up for the crowd who stood up by and sneered."²

Would we do it too? Would we make up for those who did not follow the star? Would we make up for those who did not acknowledge *Emmanuel: God with us?*

I pray that we too, would open our hearts to those unlike us. I pray that we too, search for God so persistently that we may find God, and perhaps in the middle of our darkness, we may answer God as God calls:

² By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day.

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

*For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.*

May God's purpose lead us this year to be for those who cannot be for themselves.