

Feast of the Epiphany: 4 January, 2009
Is 60:1-6; Ps 72:1-7, 10-14
Eph 3:1-12; Matt 2:1-12

Rev. Deborah Meister

On the twelfth day, more or less, the Magi appeared, wise men from the east, bearing gifts for the Christ child. They had seen his star, and so, like so many others, they came to wonder: to kneel, to gaze, to adore, to offer gifts. Then they left again, by another road.

They left by another road, scripture tells us, because Herod was seeking the child, to kill him. The truth is, they need not have bothered. It was already certain that any road the Magi took would have been new to them; you cannot gaze on the face of God and emerge the same. Those wise men stumbled blinking from the light of God into the mere light of day, and, like St. Paul after his conversion on the road to Damascus, they emerged into a world that had been made strange to them. They were already rendered unfit for a world in which tyrants kill children – every male under two years of age in all the city of Bethlehem. And it was too late for the children of Bethlehem, whichever road the Magi took: Herod's soldiers were already on the march; their lives were measured in hours, not years. The bitter paradox had already begun to manifest itself: that God had come into the world to redeem it, yet the world seemed much the same. The Messiah had come to the world, yet tyrants continued to rage: the poor were hungry; the sick continued to die. The same question that haunts us today haunted the Magi on that secret return: How can such things be, that great good and terrible evil can coexist in one small world?

Scripture tells us that when the Magi came to Christ, they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold, to crown a king. Frankincense, the sweet-scented incense that honored a deity. Myrrh, to wrap a dead body before it is laid in the tomb. Of those gifts, two would have had value in the old order of things (the two Isaiah mentions); one carried about it the very stench of death it was intended to mask. In other words, the gifts, like our hearts, were only partially converted. We cling in our hearts to the gift of gold: to what is beautiful and valuable in the eyes of the world, to what confers power and signifies authority, to what makes human beings seem immortal, like gods. We cling in our hearts to the gift of frankincense: to worship and ceremony performed in good order (this is, after all, an *Episcopal* church), to gods which behave in predictable ways, rewarding the good and punishing the guilty, to the sweetness of the senses, to fragrant offerings lifted up to God that cost us money, but not much more. But we shrink in fear from the gift of myrrh, the cross of Christ, God's presence in pain and death, the rot which exists in our world and in our soul, which we would prefer not to see. And yet – it was by the cross as well as by the Incarnation that God redeemed the world.

There is a strange thing about receiving a gift: you have to open it for it to have active value in your life. If I hand you a box containing heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them, but you admire its wrapping and put it on the shelf, unopened, that box does you no good. You will never know the riches that were within. You could walk every day past peace, joy, love, and mercy, and never know they were there. You could think, every once in a while, of opening the box, just to see what was within, but then the phone would ring, or you'd remember an appointment and rush off, and the box would remain untouched. You'll open it eventually, you think; there's plenty of time.

I think that, too often, we act like that with the gifts of Christ – not because we are bad or careless people, but because of a fundamental ambivalence. We *want* the promises of Christ, but still, we are afraid of the cross. We are afraid because we sense that, if God could put God's only Son up there, God could put us there as well.

It's a fearful thought, and I think we are not often honest enough to admit it. The very manner of our salvation can raise within us, not only hope, love, confidence, and gratitude, but

also fear and distrust. If this, the greatest revelation of the nature of God, hinges on a death as well as a resurrection, if previous epiphanies – from the burning bush to Elijah’s wind and earthquake to the gifts of the wise men – point toward danger as well as deliverance, then we are unsure of our own place in God’s heart. It is safe – very safe – to speak of salvation as a deliverance given to us at the end of time. That is very far off, we assume, and it leaves God far off, too, comfortably far from us. We do not have to trust that, like the bush, we can burn without being consumed. It seems riskier – riskier far – to believe what Jesus showed us: that the promises of God are not only for eternity, but for now, for today – for even today we stand at the threshold of God’s house, and do not know it. Even today, God holds out to us the riches of intimacy with Christ, all the blessings that will be fulfilled in heaven, and we do not open the box. Christ kneels before us, offering his gifts, and we – we turn away.

We say that the way to open them is hard. We say that praying every day is tedious – and, certainly, there are days when it is, when your mind is distracted and the work is sheer slog. But without it, the days when prayer is easy become fewer, for we have not practiced saying “yes” to God. We say that reading Scripture is boring – and, certainly, sections of it are – but without it, we our minds do not take on the shape of the mind of Christ. We say that meditating or keeping a journal are self-absorbed activities, that we would rather help others in the name of Christ, and we find that we learn little from all our service. We say that we are busy – too busy for such things, too busy to help one another – and we are! We are terribly, terribly busy, and, for all our running around, and all we cram into our days, our weeks seem more and more empty of meaning. We say many things, and make up many excuses, and of them are true at times, but really, they are not the issue. We fear what we might learn about ourselves. We fear that we will lose who we are. We fear that we might have to change. We fear that hint of myrrh wafting in the wind.

But the myrrh is inevitable. If we do not take it from God, we will inflict it on one another. All around us, the old world rages: guns and bombs and cancer stalk the earth, and, in Bethlehem, the children continue to die. For us, as for the Magi, there is no other road; there is only the company we choose to walk in. For two thousand years, good people have pointed at evil, but refused the antidote. And yet, as T.S.Eliot writes, “the only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre -- / to be redeemed from fire by fire.” We can choose to offer ourselves to the cleansing sacrifice of God, or we can choose to sacrifice one another. There is no other way.

The good news of God, the good news of Epiphany, is that in Christ we are not dead wood, but burning bush that can burn without being consumed. We may lay down our selves, but only to be renewed and strengthened. We may need to enter into the pain of loss, but only to see it reborn in new love. We may need to give of our very lives, but in losing them we will find them.

When the Magi returned home, what did they find? Their old courts, their old friends, the old politics, the altars of old gods. We do not know what they did when they returned. We do not know how they were changed. But we don’t have to imagine it; we can live it instead. We serve a God who has the most amazing capacity to transform whatever dead things he touches to living ones. The gold the Magi brought became, under his influence, not the static sign of power and greed, but of generosity and new life. The frankincense of civic religion became the freely-offered fragrance of lilies in the field. The herbs of death became the prelude to resurrection.

So rest assured, little ones: what God has done to dead gold, he can do to you, and he will if you let him. Christ kneels before us with all his gifts extended, and it is up to us to receive them. So “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... You shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the [Lord] shall be brought to you,” if you will only open the gate of your heart and let him in. (Is 60:1-2, 5)