

Epiphany 2014, St Paul the Apostle, Hancock, NY

♪♪ *We three kings of orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar.
Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.
O star of wonder, star of night, Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.* ♪♪

Today is the feast of the Epiphany. When we think of the Epiphany, most of us think of the lyrics of the carol we just sang & the story in today's Gospel. It is a story of kings and gifts and a long trip. The word Epiphany in Greek means "appearance" or "manifestation."

Christ shows himself as who he is, the real *star* of the Gospel story. In fact, the messiah is described as a "star" in the book of Numbers (Num. 24:17) & I love the way the word star is repeated in the carol "We Three Kings".

But this feast of the Epiphany is really about the *many* ways the light of Christ bursts forth. On this day - in ancient liturgies, - no less than three epiphanies, three manifestations of Jesus are remembered. The visit of the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, [which we celebrate next weekend on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord] and his first public miracle when he changed water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana.

There is an ancient Italian story about this feast which I love. My sister, Barbara, tells it when our family gathers for Christmas. In fact, I told that story on Christmas at Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Delanson [If you want to read the whole story, go to [Christmas 2013](#) in the Sunday Homilies section of the Bethany Ministries website]

The story is about an ancient woman called "La Befana". [Her name means "Epiphany."]. She is invited to go to Bethlehem by the Magi, but gets there too late to find "the divine child who will change the world." Yet she was not discouraged, and she had lots of food and gifts, so she decided to give gifts to all the children she could find.

And to this day in Italy, La Befana comes on January 5th (the eve of the Epiphany when we celebrate the kings bringing gifts to Jesus). She comes to bring gifts to all children, because any one of them could be that divine child who will change the world. It could be you, or you, or you, you....

What do the stories we hear around Christmastime have to tell us today? I think that the story of la Befana is another way to tell the Christmas story. And Christmas itself celebrates the first appearance - the first "epiphany" of the child who will change the world. The whole Gospel story is the story of how we are loved, no matter who we are. God has given us the greatest gift there is, Jesus, the Son of God, before we can do anything to deserve it. We recall that truth every time we baptize a baby and remember that the gift of God's love is pure, unearned grace.

And when we were baptized, we became part of the Body of Christ and received the power of his Spirit so *we* can change the world. We will recall that when we sing, ♪♪ We are the Body of Christ ♪♪ during the Eucharistic Prayer.

But that is not the end of the story. Once we have a gift, we need to unwrap it and use it for good, the way Jesus did at Cana. We need to pass it on. That's what the Magi did with the wealth they had. Gold, and frankincense - [that's like incense we burn in church.] And Myrrh - [that's what they put on Jesus' body after he died]. All three were very expensive in the ancient world, but they did not lock their wealth up in a safe deposit box, they packed it up and brought it to Bethlehem.

And many ancient and modern stories say that these rulers were different when they went back home to their kingdoms. They did not imitate Herod's fear and cruelty, they went home by another way. They acted a lot like the king in the responsorial psalm today, they rescued the poor when they cried out, they did what they could to make justice and peace flower in their lands - the way Pope Francis is inviting all the world to do, not only by his words but by the example of his life.

I believe we need to hear these stories in our own time, and to tell them to each other so that we can counteract the poison of the stories we are told over and over by the world around us. We need to ask ourselves what stories shape our lives?

Instead of the story that says you can only be "somebody" if you have power and use it to make threats or do acts of violence, the story of la Befana says that God loves every one of us, and that any one of us could be someone who will change the world, so we need to care for each other as precious gifts.

Instead of the belief that "greed is good" and you have to keep your wealth just for yourself, the story of the magi tells us that we get richer by taking the blessings we have been given and using them to bless others so that no one is hungry or homeless.

Instead of the principle that says that the earth is a quarry that we can exploit for individual or corporate gain - at the expense of the poor and future generations of those yet unborn - The Gospel story tells about how Jesus becomes one of us, taking human flesh from the very earth he helped create and teaches us how to be good stewards of that earth, even showing us how to change the water of our ordinary lives into the sweet wine of justice, love and peace.

We need to hear *these* stories, tell them to each other and tell them to our leaders, to remind them that they were elected so that they can discern & promote the common good in ways that individuals cannot. We need to challenge them to care for the hungry in our own country and to work together to fix a broken system of immigration.

Both individually and together, we need to use the gifts *we* have responsibly- using them to care for the air and the water and the land and we need to resist the temptation to make choices which will poison our water, pollute the atmosphere and deplete the land. Those choices may lead to a short term gain but they usually result in a few becoming very rich while the poor go hungry.

The Gospel today challenges us to dare to be different from the Herods & the scribes of *our* world, who always need to be on top & in control, no matter who gets hurt. The Gospel story invites us to let Jesus be the star of our lives. The feast of the Epiphany and the whole Christmas season is a promise that we will find a way to be at home with Jesus and each other, no matter who seems to have the power.

There have been many songs that tell the story of the Magi; we will sing some of them at today's Mass, but one of my favorites is by James Taylor. You can easily find it on You Tube. It encourages us to be like the Magi - to let Jesus change us - to act more like members of the Body of Christ - to imitate Pope Francis. The title of the song says it all: *Home by another way*.

♪♪ Those magic men, the Magi, some people call them wise,
Or oriental, even kings, well anyway, those guys.
They visited with Jesus, they sure enjoyed their stay
Then warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme
They went home by another way.

Yes they went home by another way, home by another way.

Maybe me and you can be wise guys too

And go home by another way. [I only sang this much at the parish – the rest of the lyrics follow]

We can make it another way, safe home as they used to say.

Keep a weather eye to the chart on high and go home another way.

Steer clear of royal welcomes, avoid a big to-do.

A king who would slaughter the innocents will not cut a deal for you.

He really, really wants those presents, he'll comb your camel's fur.

Until his boys announce they've found trace amounts of your frankincense, gold and myrrh.

Time to go home by another way, home by another way.

You have to figure the odds saying play the odds

And go home by another way. Safe home, as they used to say.

Keep a weather eye to the chart on high and go home another way.

*Home is where they want you now,
you can more or less assume that you'll be welcome in the end.
Mustn't let King Herod haunt you so,
or fantasize his features when you're looking at a friend*

Well it pleases me to be here and to sing this song tonight.

They tell me that life is a miracle and I figure that they're right.

But Herod's always out there, he's got your card on file.

It's a lead pipe cinch, if we give an inch, old Herod likes to take a mile.

It's best to go home by another way, Home by another way.

We got this far to a lucky star but tomorrow is another day.

We can make it another way, safe home as they used to say.

Keep a weather eye to the chart on high and go home by another way. ♪♪