

Blessed be the Name of the Lord, from henceforth and for evermore.

There were a lot of firsts this year at my house – having gotten married in April and having graduated from seminary three weeks later: a first Thanksgiving with in-laws in our own home; I found out that my mom and I are a lot alike, in that we get extremely stressed out for the hour or so before the guests arrive. We had our first dinner party – just last night, with some old friends; and a mentor of mine, The Rev. Dr. Tony Lewis, retired professor of New Testament at Virginia Seminary, came to bless our home. There's even chalk marks above the entry door – an old Epiphany tradition.

It was also our first Christmas together. I have found out that my spouse gets really excited about Christmas decorations. We had our first Christmas tree – a perfectly symmetrical, sturdy Balsam fir that lasted from the day after Thanksgiving until now – it will be taken down later today, sadly. The ladies of Chatting Fingers provided us with a few of our first Christmas tree ornaments. And Dottie Ninde gave us a wonderful gift – our first Nativity set. The three Wise Men have been unboxed, but appropriately journeying across the living room toward the stable – at first, they sat on a book shelf, setting their faces toward Bethlehem; more recently, they have occupied the entry way table, a bit closer – and yesterday, they finally joined the shepherds and the angels beside the manger.

I don't know why, exactly, but there is something about those Wise Men that has captured my attention this year, as their figures have slowly made their way

toward the porcelain tableau of the Nativity. They seem so out of place wherever they are; separated from their brethren figurines by a few feet of carpeting. Even as they journey, the Wise Men are already bowing low, preparing for the offering of their oblations at the feet of the infant God. Their faces are exotic: one, very dark, and the others, a kind of vague indeterminate brown. But there is something “other” about them – a physical representation of what some artist somewhere has interpreted as “Gentile.”

Matthew’s gospel tells us that these “Wise Men” come from the “East” – but it tells us precious little else about them. Historians and archaeologists tell us that, as one commentator has noted, “ancient magi were persons reputed to be adept at astronomy as well as various occult arts, such as astrology, interpretation of dreams, fortune telling, and magic. Here they are clearly thought of as astronomers or astrologers, who have found the rising of a star to be of world-historical significance. It was a common idea in antiquity that the birth or death of great men was accompanied by heavenly signs.”¹

The Prophet Isaiah, in our reading from the Hebrew scriptures, prophesies that “nations will stream to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawning.” The coming of Christ into the world has long been interpreted, by Christian believers, as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s proclamation. And so, in Christian tradition, these Wise Men have also been regarded as Kings. When they come to Jesus’ birthplace, they offer these famous gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh: not items that would’ve necessarily been handy around the house where a toddler

¹ Stephen Hultgren. Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12. Web: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2304 Retrieved 5 January 2018.

lives, but rather symbolic oblations. Gold, to signify royalty; frankincense, to signify divinity; and myrrh, a precious embalming salve, to signify the suffering and death he was eventually to undergo.

Whatever and whomever they were, it seems fair enough to deduce that these Wise Men were indeed seekers after truth – they paid attention to the Zodiac, and to what they saw as heavens infused with meaning, of significance the humble inhabitants of the earth below. Perhaps the focus of their truth seeking was a little off – perhaps somewhat misguided – but it is worth noting, I think, that God found them and spoke to them anyway. As someone who has frequently focused on the wrong goal, and fumbled around for the truth from time to time myself, it is comforting to know that God can find us, even in our apparent misguidedness and even blindness. Perhaps, then, the search for Truth – with a capital T – is something that God fundamentally honors.

On the feast of the Epiphany recognize the call of Christ to all people; an old title for Epiphany, listed as an alternate in our own Book of Common Prayer, describes this celebration as the “manifestation of Christ to the gentiles.” That’s us! In a real way, the Epiphany story narrates a true moment of conversion – that they Three Wise Men, looking high and low for the fundamental truth that infuses the whole of the universe, in their searching, finally find the source and true object of their worship.

Pope Francis, on the Feast of the Epiphany 2015, preached a sermon in St. Peter’s Basilica, in which he notes that “the Wise Men represent men and woman who seek God in the world’s religions and philosophies: an unending quest...They sought the true Light. They set out in search of God...It is *the Holy Spirit* who called them

and prompted them to set out; during their journey they were also to have a *personal encounter* with the true God. These wise men from the East were the first in that great procession of which the prophet Isaiah spoke in today's first reading: a procession which from that time on has continued uninterrupted; in every age it hears the message of the star and finds the Child who reveals the tenderness of God. New persons are always being enlightened by that star; they find the way and come into his presence...their encounter with Jesus changed their lives and, therefore, changed the course of their journey. They did not return to Herod who represented the abuse of power and a form of idolatry that placed human ambition over God's plan of redemption. The wise men left for their own country but went by another route. Having entered the mystery of the incarnation they were converted."² Not only were they, then, among the first converts to the Living Christ, but they were likewise his first missionaries.

People of God, friends in Christ, that same Jesus is the True Light which invites us to enter into that mystery, like the Wise Men at the manger. That same Jesus invites us into that total transformation that the Wise Men experienced – that redirection, that conversion. And, that same Jesus, invites us to let go of our confusion, our misdirection, our fumbling around in the dark, searching for the truth – That Jesus meets you here, today, the True Light that enlightens all men.

Amen.

² Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis on the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord – St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, Rome. Web: http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/01/06/pope_francois_epiphany_homily_2015/1117078
Retrieved 5 January 2018.