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**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC      January 5, 2020**  
**Epiphany – Year A - 2020      Matthew 2:1-12**

The number of Americans identifying with organized religion has declined significantly in the past 10-20 years. Still, a majority of these same people would say they are spiritual or religious in some vague, general way. A significant number of this same group would describe themselves as “seekers”—they are looking for something. They are not quite sure what it is, but something that will satisfy their spiritual needs. Today's feast of the Epiphany celebrates God revealing, manifesting God's self to the Magi, to those who come seeking. So let us look to this story to see if there are any insights to help those who are disillusioned with organized religion, but are still on a spiritual quest.

In today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah, we hear—“Jerusalem! Your light has come. See darkness covers the earth...but upon you the Lord shines....Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance....The wealth of nations shall be brought to you. Caravans of camels shall fill you...bringing gold, frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord.” The scene Isaiah depicts is a celebration of the political power of Israel, whereby the pagan, Gentile kings, come from far off to acknowledge, to bow down before Israel's rule.

The scene that Matthew presents is similar in some ways, but different in significant details. Again there is light shining in the darkness, with visitors coming from a great distance; again bringing gifts, but these individuals are not rulers of foreign nations. Here, they are Magi, wise men, scholars, astronomers, the scientists of their day. They come seeking not power, but wisdom, truth, meaning, understanding, enlightenment. St. Matthew, in his gospel, reframes the picture painted by Isaiah, because now the One who sits at the center of the scene, the Christ, is not concerned with the love of power, but with the power of love.

So, then, what precisely is the Epiphany, how is God being revealed? It is when the Magi behold Mary and the child Jesus, and realize that the power of God is like the bond between a mother and her child: accepting, empowering, unconditional. In the Old Testament Isaiah asks, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will never forget you, o Israel.” As unbreakable as is that maternal bond, so is God's love for humanity. That is what the Magi discover after all the traveling, after all their searching. And now this compassionate, maternal love of God is displayed not just for one nation, Israel, but for all the nations. This is the epiphany of God. This is the scene depicted so often

and so beautifully in Christian art, in all those images created by the great masters of the Madonna and Child. This is what God's love is like: this is what we are invited to contemplate today.

The question remains, how do the Magi serve as models for "religious seekers" today? The Magi, the wise men, are depicted as coming from the east, from Persia, from what is today Iraq and Iran. They are described as "astrologers;" especially skilled in calculating the movements of the stars and planets, to such a degree that their calculations predicted the placement of the heavenly bodies with amazing accuracy, even to this day. St. Matthew is describing people who are using all their learning, all their science, all their knowledge, all their wisdom, to bring them to the threshold of faith. They are led by a star to discover the newborn King of the Jews. When they arrive at Bethlehem, they find not a king, but a child with his mother. Like good scientists, they revise their expectations. They have, in fact, found more than what they were looking for. They have found the One who created all the stars and planets in this little child. So, as learned, as wise, as knowledgeable as they are, they bow in reverence and awe.

What the story of the Magi reminds us of is that all human knowledge, wisdom, and science can be employed in the task of deepening, of enriching our faith. Because God is the source of all truth, because God is both Creator and Revealer, we need never be afraid of where the path of scientific inquiry might lead us. Science and religion are not opposed to each other. People don't realize that the individual who originated the Big Bang Theory about the origin of universe was a Catholic priest, Father George LeMaitre. Science can lead us to the threshold of faith, to ponder its intricacy, his origin, its purpose in reverential awe.

So on this feast of the Epiphany, let us be truly "catholic," with a small "c", i.e., universal—open to all peoples and open to all human knowledge, science and wisdom. Let us never put obstacles in the path of those who are "seeking," seeking something more than the materialism our age offers to them. And, let us return in spirit to that scene in Bethlehem and present our own gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh: the gold of our talents, our abilities; the frankincense, the devotion of our faith; and our myrrh, the ointment which was used for healing--here we bring those parts of ourselves that have been battered and bruised by life. We bring the totality of who we are and present ourselves to Him who accepts us as we are, offering compassion and mercy, empowering us to continue on the journey. In a few minutes we will welcome the risen Christ in the Eucharist. Let us do so with openness and trust, confident that He continues to sustain and support us on that journey.