Feast of Epiphany
Cycle A, 1.5.2020
Isaiah 60:1-6/Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6/
Matthew 2:1-12

THE JOURNEY THAT ENLARGES OUR SOUL

At the beginning of a new year on this Feast of the Epiphany, the ancient chant of the date of Easter and the coming feasts moves our thoughts forward. But the New Year also invites us to look back over the past twelve months to see how God’s grace was at work in our lives, not just on feast days but every day. As I look back over the year’s highlights, I reminisce about a trip in September to Germany. Four days were spent on the Rhine River Valley – charming little towns, ancient castles that dotted the river’s coast line, and lush vineyards to rival Napa and Sonoma. The next four days were spent in the great city of Cologne. One of its claims to fame is the fact that the fragrant perfumes we’re wearing originated in and were named for that city – cologne. The other significance of Cologne is that its magnificent cathedral houses the most beautiful reliquary ever made in the Middle Ages and, according to legend, it contains the relics of the three magi whose story unfolds in Matthew’s gospel.

The trip to Germany was well-planned – thanks to tour books, internet searches, advice from people who had been to those places before … and our wonderful tour guide who did all the planning for us. Our destinations were clearly marked out. We knew where we would be staying each night and what we had hoped to see and do. I suppose most of your travels are like that, too. Well thought out and planned to fine detail. In a strange place it’s very uncomfortable not to know where you’ll be sleeping or who or what you’ll be encountering.

What a different venture for our Epiphany travelers, the magi of Matthew’s gospel, setting out on a trip with an unknown destination, guided only by a star in the sky. Their travels take them to two very different locales: the great city of Jerusalem and the village of Bethlehem.

The two cities are about nine miles apart – the distance between Lafayette and Concord -- but light years away in opulence and prestige. Matthew’s story begins in Jerusalem, a city of wealth and power, of ambition and prosperity, of arrogance and pretension. Jerusalem proudly sees itself as the poet-prophet Isaiah’s city of light, radiance and glory - and the big business in travel and tourism that comes with it.

These mysterious travelers from a place far away come to Jerusalem, naturally, looking for the Messiah-king. They meet with King Herod, who is unnerved to learn that a potential rival may
exist. Herod, as unstable and cruel a tyrant as has ever lived, immediately consults his professional theologians: What's all this about camels and gold and frankincense and myrrh? They tell his majesty that his visitors are using the wrong text and point to another prophecy, from the prophet Micah, that says God will raise up a ruler for Israel . . . from Bethlehem. You've got to be kidding, Herod had to be thinking. Bethlehem? So Herod sends the magi quietly off to Bethlehem while planning his next move.

Bethlehem, nine miles to the south, is the equivalent of a bus depot or train station: merchants and travelers stop for a meal, change horses or camels, spend the night while on their way to far more important and profitable places. Its only distinction is that it's the hometown of the great King David; other than that, Bethlehem barely exists in people's consciousness. Bethlehem has no pretensions to greatness; it's poor, humble and unimportant. Yet in this most hidden of places the magi find the Messiah. In Bethlehem of all places is born God's Christ: the anointed one who will usher in a new reign of peace, the savior who will bring well-being to his people not by ambition but by his humble and loving service to them, the redeemer who will reconcile humanity at the cost of his own life. The reign of the Messiah-king begins in Jerusalem. To their everlasting credit, the magi travel those nine miles beyond Jerusalem - and find a very different way home.

Matthew's Epiphany story reminds us that we often look for our life's purpose and meaning in the wrong places. We seek fulfillment and satisfaction in the rich, proud Jerusalems we have built - but God calls us to travel those hard, demanding nine miles to the humble, generous, forgiving dwelling place of the Messiah. In her book, The Soul of Money, author Lynn Twist addresses the myth of “scarcity” – living as if life won't provide what we need to bring us happiness. She writes: “For me and for many of us, our first waking thought of the day is “I didn’t get enough sleep.” The next one is “I don’t have enough time.”

Whether this is true or not, that thought of ‘not enough’ occurs to us automatically before we even have time to question or examine it. We spend many of the hours and the days of our lives worrying about what we don’t have enough of.... We don’t have enough exercise. The business doesn’t have enough profit. We don’t have enough power... not enough energy. Of course, we don’t have enough money – ever. We’re not thin enough, smart enough, we’re not pretty enough or fit enough or educated enough, or rich enough. Before we even sit up in bed, before our feet touch the floor, we’re already feel inadequate, already
behind, already losing, already lacking something. We go to sleep burdened by those thoughts and wake up to the reverie of 'lack'. What begins as a simple expression of the hurried life, or even the challenged life, grows into the great justification for an unfulfilled life.” That’s one writer’s take. And when struggles burden us – poor health, the loss of a loved one, the anger over a world filled with poverty and war, discrimination and hatred, we can all share that deep sense of an unfulfilled life.

Today on the Feast of the Epiphany, as we look ahead to the year’s culmination in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, we can reassure ourselves that we know in our hearts where our fulfillment lies. United with Christ, nourished by the scriptures and the Eucharist, supported by the love and companionship of our brothers and sisters here in this community and in all the communities we form, we have received and will receive sufficient grace to enjoy fulfilled lives.

May we find our way to God by the route discovered by the Eastern travelers this Epiphany: the road of Bethlehem’s humility, generosity, and kindness that will transform the soulless Jerusalems of our lives and bring us the peace and satisfaction of God’s love, made visible and abundant in Jesus. May God grant us all a happy and fulfilling New Year.

John Kasper, OSFS