

Fire That God!

January 4, 2015 ~ Feast of the Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

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Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage. [Matthew 2:2]

One of the best things about being a priest in Silicon Valley is the cultural diversity of our parishes. With that diversity comes the many different traditions of our many immigrant groups. For example, with Catholics from Mexico, a tradition for today's *Feast of the Epiphany* is called *Rosca de Reyes*, or, in English, the *Kings' Cake*.

The cake (or, rather, the bread) is decorated with dried and candied fruits and includes an element of fun. The baker hides in the bread a small figurine of the Christ Child who, with Mary and Joseph, hides from King Herod who intends to kill Jesus. People take turns slicing into the bread with a knife, which symbolizes the deadly threat of King Herod. Whoever finds the small figurine of the Christ Child is considered blessed and is supposed to throw a party with *tamales* and *atole*, which is a holiday drink similar to hot chocolate. *Rosca de Reyes* is a fun tradition and helps to give life to the Gospel we proclaim today.

I'm attracted to the Gospel story of the Magi's visit. I'm intrigued by their desire to seek out life's deeper meaning, a desire that finds its fulfillment when they encounter Jesus, at which their natural response is to offer him gifts. And yet, I see in those gifts something more being offered. I see them offering themselves to him. Of course, the most important gift being offered is the gift of Jesus that God offers you and me.

The word *Epiphany* means *manifestation*, or, a *showing from above*. The Eastern Orthodox Churches are more exact, calling this feast day *Theophany*, meaning *manifestation of God*. As such, today's Gospel proclamation reminds us that more is happening than simply Magi from the east visiting the Christ Child and presenting him with expensive gifts. Instead, since antiquity, Christians have understood Jesus as God's self-revelation, as God's gift of God's own self to people of every nation, of every generation, without discrimination. In Jesus, God doesn't hold back, but enters our lives in the clearest, most unmistakable way.

Teenagers, here's what today's *Feast of the Epiphany* can mean for you. Please know that Jesus is God's *Epiphany*, the manifestation of God's compassion and care for you and for us all. Sunday to Sunday, we gather in this sacred space to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus who attends to people who were sick, cries with those who mourned, eats meals with those whom others despised, and forgives those who harm others. This is the Jesus that

the Magi visit and to whom they present gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This is the Jesus who gives direction and purpose to your life, my life, and everyone's life.

And yet, sadly, we too easily hold onto a different image of God than the one Jesus shows us. One of my favorite writers is Philip Yancey. He writes of his childhood image of God:

“I grew up with the image of a mathematical God who weighed my good and bad deeds on a set of scales and always found me wanting. Somehow I missed the God of the gospels, a God of mercy and generosity.”¹

In another book, Yancey writes about a woman who cringes whenever she hears God addressed as “Father” in prayer, because her earthly father's abuse forever spoiled that word for her. Yancey writes of another friend who grows up with the image of a white, male God being up there, “with a huge white beard and large hands, an autocrat who keeps track of all her defects. Years later, she describes that image of God to a spiritual mentor. After a long, emphatic pause, the mentor suggests, ‘Why don't you just consider firing that God?’ So she does.”² That sounds to me like good advice.

Author Anne Lamott writes about another false image of God:

“You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”³

Of course, that god should be fired, too. Indeed, we do well to fire any god who doesn't line up square with the God of compassion and mercy whom Jesus reveals to us.

Today, *magi* continue to approach Jesus with their gifts. I invite you to look for them. When we see someone offering a talent, such leading music, we see the *magi* offering their gift to Jesus. When we see someone offering their time to a classmate who's confused after a relationship ends, we see the *magi* offering their gift to Jesus. When we see someone offering their money (their treasure) to the homeless person standing at the spotlight, we see the *magi* offering their gift to Jesus.

As we begin this new year, I ask you to make a simple resolution. When you enter this church throughout the year, I ask you to see yourself among the magi who approach Jesus. You don't need to offer gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Sunday to Sunday, you can offer Jesus whatever you have that day: your time, your talent, your treasure.

And, Jesus will only say *thank you* for the gift you offer.

¹ Yancey, Philip, “What's So Amazing About Grace?,” (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), p. 70.

² adapted from Esther Elizabeth, from the *Journey Into Freedom* newsletter, as cited in Yancey, Philip, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 47.

³ Lamott, Anne, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), p. 20.