

Homily - The Epiphany of the Lord

A little over a year ago, not too long after I was first assigned to the parish, for reasons I can't explain I got the idea in my head that I wanted to watch the sunrise - from the top of a mountain.

So, at about 4am one Friday morning, I made my way out to one of the more obscure intersections of the Appalachian Trail, and started climbing toward a summit where I knew I'd have a view of the horizon.

I can tell you there's a very primal part of your brain that really doesn't like being alone on a mountain in the middle of the night. It's the part that keeps reminding you, "You know bears live out here, right?"

But once I was sitting on the summit, that worry disappeared as soon as the sun broke over the horizon.

With the shadows and haze burned away, the mountain looked like an entirely different place, and as I descended, there was none of that tension or anxiety that had followed me before.

That timeless image of a revealing light breaking into the world is one which pervades Scripture.

The Gospel and Letters of the apostle John, for instance, use light as one of the first themes to reveal Christ's identity.

Today, in this Christmas celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany, it is another light - the small, shining light of a star - that first guides the Magi across the known world to encounter the one who is Light Himself, the newborn Messiah.

This wouldn't be the only revelation of Jesus and his identity, of course.

Traditionally, in fact, the themes of this feast have also been tied to other key moments of epiphany in the Gospels, of the realization of who Christ was and what he came to accomplish.

The second was in his Baptism in the Jordan, in which his identity as the beloved Son of God was made known by the witness of the Father's voice speaking from Heaven, and the descent of the Spirit like a dove.

Third was his self-revelation in the wedding feast of Cana, as Jesus began his miracles with the changing of water into wine, which pointed ahead to the mystery of his own death and resurrection.

We are invited with the Magi and all those who experienced those moments of theophany, the manifestation of Christ's divinity, to follow in their footsteps and contemplate what God is saying to us about who he is and what he wants to do in our lives.

The truth is, most of us experience our faith accompanied by more than a few shadows, doubts, or reasons for anxiety.

We may be physically present in our pews, but our minds and hearts are elsewhere.

We are worried and distracted, tied down by sin and constrained by fear.

We can feel, like the Magi, that the Lord is inviting us to walk with him to someplace new, where our faith is deeper and the freedom he promises is more real to us, but we are afraid to set out on that journey.

He is calling out to us as he did through the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“Rise up in splendor! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you.”

Every one of us should be able to look within our hearts and realize that if we truly examine our lives and our desires, we are not completely satisfied.

We are not yet at peace.

How could we be, when we do not fully possess the one thing that our hearts were made for - when are not yet at rest in the presence of Our Lord?

But he wants to put you on that path. That journey begins with realizing, as so many of us have, that we are not truly, completely happy, and nothing the world has ever given us has lived up that promise.

Can you admit that to yourself?

If so, then realize the Lord is offering something better - and he is giving us a light to find the way.

The Magi received the guidance of a star, but we have something far more personal and accessible, if we only stop to notice it.

We have the voice of the Lord himself, speaking and shining out in the silence of prayer.

If you haven't experienced it for yourself, there's no way I can perfectly explain it to you, any more than one could explain the beauty of the stars in the night sky.

You have to witness it firsthand.

And yes, there are guides along the way. Countless Saints dedicated their lives, their preaching, and their writings to discerning the movement and direction of the Lord's voice, like the Magi charting the paths of the heavenly bodies.

But in the end, we have to take action.

No amount of thought or study alone will get us any closer to where that star is leading, or to the Lord who waits to reveal himself in his humble glory.

We have to take real, concrete steps to seek him out, and to make real sacrifices and offerings to center our lives on him, just as the Magi offered him their own precious gifts.

And then, when we do encounter him, we have to realize that our journey is not complete.

Conversion, the experience of profound change that comes from our personal relationship with Jesus Christ, sets us on a new path - not back to the Herods of our lives, the old sins and spiritual traps that imprisoned us before, but on a journey toward the freedom we have always longed for.

As Pope Saint Gregory the Great writes,

“Our country is Paradise, to which, after we have come to the knowledge of Christ we are forbidden to return the way we came.

We have left this country by pride, disobedience, following things of sight, tasting forbidden food; and we must return to it by repentance, obedience, by condemning things of sight, and overcoming carnal appetite.”

All of this only begins when we choose to recognize and respond to his epiphany - the way he has revealed himself in our presence.

And if there is one thing we cannot say often enough, that the Church has proclaimed for nigh on two millennia, it is that Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, the dawning light of the world, is here in our presence, just as truly as he was in Bethlehem of Judea.

Take a moment - imagine that you could go back in time, two thousand years ago, and be there with the Magi on the day they did homage to the King of Kings, there with Our Lady herself, in the simplicity of Bethlehem.

Would we be as quick to leave that day as we are to leave our own church?

Would we treat him with greater love, devotion, or reverence?

How would we pray?

What gifts would we give him?

Who would we invite to share in that moment?

My friends, the same Jesus Christ is here... so come - let us adore him.