

Now is the Hour

With bated breath, all creation was waiting for redemption. Like any one of us who, on cold days like these, sits by the fire with bones so desperately aching to be warmed...creation ached to be set free from the bondage of sin, decay, and death. The trees lifted their arms in praise *and* desperation. The oceans raged with a feverish anticipation that bubbled just below the surface. The heavens thundered and lit themselves up, for all creation knew that the time had come, and the crowning of a new king was just around the corner. But amidst this earthy symphony of coronation, it was a star that sang the loudest, shone the brightest, and preached the Gospel with a certain kind of clarity. And, in a surprising twist of fate, it wasn't the learned rabbis filled with messianic hope who first attuned themselves to the star's message. It was a trio of outsiders, of soothsayers and astrologers...a trio of magic men who would have been shunned from the Temple in Jerusalem because they spoke the wrong language, wore the wrong robes, and prayed to the wrong gods. Nevertheless, these outsiders caught a glimpse of the star's luminous proclamation and saw fit to leave behind all that they had ever known, make an arduous and treacherous journey, and respond to a God whose name had always eluded them.

This, my friends, is the beauty of the Epiphany. No one is left outside of the Grand Wedding Feast of Salvation. No land is left in shadow because of the holy child of God! These mysterious men from the East responded by faith to a God they didn't know, journeying towards a mysterious revelation the depth of which no one could fully fathom, and thereby illustrated the depths of God's love for all of humanity. No one is excluded. No one is locked out of the feast. No one is deemed unworthy. All are invited to receive the grace and mercy of the God of Israel. For once there was a great shadow that covered the land, but that shadow was beaten back by the

dawning of a new light. In the glorious birth of the Messiah, and through the arduous yet faith-filled journey of the Magi, we see this truth come to life!

Every time I reflect on the Magi, on this story, I am astounded by their faithfulness in this God they didn't know. They arrived in the region where the star had led them and found themselves in the courts of the tyrant King Herod. Being learned men, they knew full well that they were given an audience with royalty, with the ruling power of Jerusalem. They apparently cared very little, and the question they asked of King Herod haunts me each time I read it:

*“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”* On the surface, it's an innocent question. But below the surface lies a stunning condemnation of the illegitimacy of Herod's rule. In the court of a king known throughout the empire to be brutal and bloodthirsty, these Magi asked a question that ultimately said to Herod, “Though you may hold court in Jerusalem, you aren't the true king of the Jews. There is another, for whom even the stars of creation are moved to acclaim. We would pay homage to him, not you.” To call into question the legitimacy of a sitting ruler's reign in the middle of his court would have been political heresy in its highest form. And yet, with the conviction that they came to pay homage to the true king of the Jews burning within the hearts, they let fly their treasonous words. As St. John the Golden Mouth once said, *“Since this day the Magi too have come, and made a beginning of withstanding tyranny.”*

When finally they arrived at the house and paid homage to the new king, it was time for them to return home. But, as the Scriptures say, *“Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”* It is another seemingly innocent observation because taking a road that avoided Herod and his iron claws of vengeance would make sense. But on a deeper level, when read with a sense of allegorical curiosity, their return

by another road speaks volumes. The truth of the matter is that none of us, once we encounter the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, can return unchanged and unmarked to the lives we formerly lived. The lives of the Magi were so profoundly touched by that supreme revelation of grace in the Christ Child that they returned home transformed, living according to a new dispensation, a new and fuller understanding of the indescribable mysteries of God. So too for us! Once we have encountered Christ, once we have met his grace and his mercy, once we have known of his infinite love, there is no going back. There is no forgetting what we have seen and experienced. There is simply *going forward with Christ*, even if that means we must let go of what formerly gave us comfort, stability, and certainty. Once our eyes have been illuminated by divine revelation, the only thing left to do is live as faithfully and boldly as we can in response to such wondrous and luminous love.

All of this poses a question worth asking by all of us: “What is it that I desire?” Not from life in general, but from this particular encounter with Jesus Christ today. What is it you’ve come here for this morning? All of us have come here from different places and different circumstances. Some of us come with exuberant joy, ready to meet the Lord Jesus in the bread and wine of the altar. Some of us come with a sense of tired obligation, having found an email in our inbox reminding us of our required service this morning. But, no matter what has brought you here, no matter what set you on the journey that has brought you to this place, at this moment...set it aside, and say to yourself, “I’m here now. How am I going to respond to this Epiphany, to my own encounter with Jesus Christ in the gifts of the altar? Will I simply consume them as if they are merely religious snacks, or will I let the Christ in them change me, and return to my life as if by another road?”