



Not only is Epiphany rather special in its own right, recognizing the arrival of the magi to the incredibly joyous scene, and as a reminder we cannot forget that Jesus came not just for Bethlehem and the immediate surrounding vicinity, but for all the nations of the world. That's more than enough for us to marvel at for this important day on the church calendar, but it also signifies the official end of the Christmas season for us in the church, which I take to mean, at least for Sarah and mine's house, that the tree must finally come down.

It is a bittersweet moment. There is a part of me that would prefer to keep it up much, much longer in order to get our money's worth out of the thing, of course. Not only that, I tend to appreciate the aroma it gives for the room, not to mention the lights have their own calming effect day after day. Nevertheless, it cannot stay up forever. And yes, it is a process to get it down, not quite as time-consuming as the magi traveling to Bethlehem, necessarily, but it certainly has a way of testing my patience and even my immense adoration for the entire Christmas season as the lights are stranded up and all the other fixings are delicately put away.

However, if there is a way of connecting the taking down of our beloved Christmas tree with the celebratory Epiphany day, it is to remember not just the moment when the magi finally made it to their destination, but to remember that journey: all the days leading up to it, all the conversations that must have ensued, all the testing of their collective patience, all the relationships that were strengthened even more. It turns out, at least for our Christmas tree, such a story can be brought to life with each ornament that has been hanging on a branch for weeks.

One such ornament for us is a cross with Jesus, Mary and Joseph attached to the front of it. It's not one of those "old rugged cross" types. It has a golden, royal diadem appearance to it. Mary and Joseph are standing in front of the cross in these white robes, with Mary holding the baby Jesus, and the newborn has his arms wide open, as if he is truly ready to embrace the entire world, including his beloved earthly father guardian in Joseph, who has his arms crossed over on his chest, as if he's taken aback by the preciousness of the child, who appears to love him more than anyone else. And then Mary and Joseph's faces have their own story to tell. They are not smiling from cheek to cheek. Instead, their faces reveal as if they know what's coming. They know the journey that will soon commence for their child: that it may just end up on a cross. Except, they may not have realized just how much other people, just like them, would do so incredibly much to care and protect their child as well.

Mary and Joseph did not realize how much a few astrologers, or astronomers or wise men, or whatever you wish to think they were; that they were so captivated by the possibility of meeting the Son of God face-to-face that they would be willing to travel hundreds of miles, risking their lives along the way, just for the slightest chance of seeing hope and peace and love. The journey, no matter how arduous, how dangerous it would be for them; they were thoroughly convinced it was worth it. It's as if they were setting the stage for another story to ensue; that no matter how arduous, how dangerous it would be for that baby boy, he would insist on taking it all the way to a cross, for his parents, for his close friends, for complete strangers, for foreigners hundreds of miles away.

And as amazing, as mind-boggling as the first journey was for the magi, their second journey, had to be even more amazing, even more mind-boggling. After all, it would have made much more sense if they returned back to their homes on the exact same route as they took to get there. They would know the terrain. They would know what supplies they needed. Instead, they take a detour with who knows what additional risk it would be their own lives; but, already, they had fallen in love with that child. They fell in love with the hope and the peace not just for Mary and Joseph and for the surrounding Galilea. They fell in love for the hope and peace meant for their homes, too, for their families and friends. Another dangerous, arduous journey was more than worth it to save the Lord of all the nations from a kingdom set out to end all the hope before it had a chance to start.

And so, when taking down our respective Christmas trees, and looking over the ornaments, and thinking about the people and the stories behind the works of art hanging on the branches; there in lies a precious journey in of itself, not just down memory lane, but God empowering us to continue on past the Christmas season with love and hope and peace for our family and friends and strangers, even people hundreds upon hundreds of miles away. When it comes to our Lutheran take on this faith journey as a whole; it is not so much about the one we take like the magi to find our Lord. No, we believe Jesus finds *us* even before our first steps. It is more so about the one we take from our divine encounter, whether you believe that happens at birth or in baptism or some other time altogether. Regardless of the route we take from that moment, our Lord remains committed on walking with us each and every step of the way.

It's just...our Lord insists on working in and through us to bring the same level of hope and love experienced for the magi in Bethlehem to life today. So, it turns out the cross was not the end, as maybe the ornament made it seem. It's as if that cross was a jumping off point into our hearts, into our walks with Christ. No matter how arduous it may be for him to be there for us, he insists on being there right beside all the way to the end of our journey here into all eternity. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

*Image: Journey of the Magi. "The Star in the East." Steel engraving, 19th century, by Robert Brandard, after a painting by Henry Warren (1794-1879).*