

Epiphany: January 3, 2021

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

A Gospel Reflection

Happy Epiphany! Today we celebrate that all nations and all peoples may partake of the glory of the newborn Christ-child.

The wise men were my mother's favorite characters in the nativity story. Her Christmas card each year featured these three sages. I never asked her why – I'm sorry I didn't. My first reaction is that it is somewhat surprising that this was her practice. After all, she was the one who took down all of the Christmas decorations (that had only been put up the Sunday before Christmas!) on New Year's Day – her motto being, "When Christmas is over, it is over!" But maybe there was a part of her that wanted it to linger a few more days.

My second guess, though, is that for her the wise men represented her idea of elegance. My mom was the person who accessorized her home and herself with zebra prints as well as 'antiqued' furniture with gold brush strokes (remember that style?!) and who insisted that the faucets and fixtures, picture frames, etc., must be gold. So I guess I do understand the appeal for her of camels, and people in long colorful robes bringing elaborate gifts.

I have a cousin who takes the wise men and camels on a twelve day journey through his house as they make their way to the crèche. His many Facebook followers eagerly await his daily posts. Each year has a theme inspired by and reflecting events of the prior year as these figures stop at various oasis points. They could be found amongst favorite books the year his wife received her Master's Degree in library science, and they took refuge amongst family pictures the year my aunt (his mother) died. This year, having packed their hand sanitizers and masks, the Magi are spending more time outside to make it easier to social distance.

Now that I'm older, I am convinced that these wise guys did not travel alone, silhouetted against the desert sky as is so often depicted in artwork, but instead were part of a noisy caravan that would have included wise women (please be sure

to read Mary Ann Dunevant's reflection in the parish Advent reflection booklet), musicians, curious children, crying infants, and various animals --- a community traveling together following a bright star in the sky towards birth, excitedly anticipating a visit with new royalty.

It wouldn't have been an easy journey across a desert with little certainty as to what they would encounter along the way or experience at their final destination. They took some wrong turns, such as stopping in Jerusalem before finding the child with his mother in a lowly house or cave in a small village – rather than in a palace in the capital city. Who would have thought royalty and elegance would be found in such a simple setting?? Certainly a paradigm shift. And even in their tiredness and disappointment, they were wise enough to recognize Herod's false inquiries and underlying dark intentions, and to start anew by focusing on their joy at the star leading them to a different place, a different light.

But isn't that what we have done in 2020 and will continue to do so in 2021? Aren't we a community traveling together, hoping to emerge from darkness, fear, and anxiety into light, faith, and life? Does not the birth of the Christ child, a Messiah, represent so much more to us this year, when we have been deprived of so much normalcy? Hasn't this deprivation allowed us to pause, simplify our usual chaotic holiday extravaganzas, and perhaps become a little less selfish? Do we not now have a different understanding of 'essential'? Of "community"??? Of "family"???

What do we need to do as a nation, a church, a parish, and as individuals to shift the paradigm of 'me, me, me' to embrace the concept of 'us, us, us' allowing full participation of all individuals in our society? These elegant foreign strangers, who traveled from afar to share their gifts, allow us to linger a while longer in Bethlehem and contemplate our own journey to – and with – Christ. Will we travel a different way in 2021?

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