

“Follow The Light”

While I was growing up, there was a practice in our family to leave on the front hall light at night until the last person had arrived safely. The front door of our home had a large glass pane in the center through which that hall light would shine out into the darkness of the night. That light would let you know that the door had not yet been locked and that you were expected and welcome. It was particularly meaningful when I would drive home to New Jersey from collect in Chicago. Often, I'd drive straight through and arrive home at some ridiculous hour – but always the light would be on.

Years later when Peg and I had our own children, we continued this same practice of leaving the front hall light on until each one of us was home. In the darkness that light was the point of connection – you saw the light as you came home and you were aware of the light as the waiting parent. As long as that light was on, I knew that all our children weren't home yet, and I didn't sleep as soundly. This continues to be true even to this day. In so many ways, light guides us and clarifies for us what is real and true.”

It was the light of a mysterious rising star that first caught the attention of the Wise Men, the Magi, and it was the movement of that star that guided their long journey from the east to Bethlehem. Today is the Feast of Epiphany, the day we celebrate the coming of the Wise Men to worship the baby Jesus. Light had a central role in signaling to these Wise Men the birth of our Lord, and more particularly, the time and the place of His birth.

The actual Greek term epiphany means “a visible manifestation of a hidden divinity, either by a personal appearance or by some deed of power by which God's presence is made known.” In discussing our journeys of faith, you will often hear someone describe having had an “epiphany”. By that they usually mean the breaking through of God's presence into their lives in a strong and unforgettable way. Saul became the Apostle Paul through such an experience on the Damascus Road. And there is no reason to think that God does not continue to speak to each of us in fresh and dramatic ways. Let's consider how God spoke to the Magi as a prototype of how God might be speaking to us.

The Magi are mentioned only once in the gospels, in the second chapter of Matthew. Even Matthew tells us little about them. They were the first Gentiles to proclaim Jesus as King and to worship Him. The gifts they brought symbolized three essential aspects of Jesus' identity. Gold symbolized Jesus' wealth as King; frankincense or incense, his priesthood; and myrrh, a spice used to wrap the bodies of the dead, symbolized his ultimate death for us. We tend to see the Wise Men in an uni-dimensional frozen way, character-

ized by their robes, their crowns and their gifts. Their story has more depth. Their story is the tale of their journey, and their actual journey trumps the story's outcome.

The Wise Men's experience actually began with their initial observation of an unusual rising star. It is thought that they were astute observers because they were scholars of astrology, scientists of a sort. First, their disciplined study had opened them up to the discovery of Christ. So their story leads us to a question: How open and well-prepared are we for the in-breaking of God into our lives and the spiritual journey that God asks us to undertake? Does our disciplined study of scripture, our prayer life and our acts of Christian mercy prepare us to be open and receptive to the presence of God? Are we prepared for an Epiphany when one comes to us?

Second, the three Wise Men traveled a long, long treacherous way – perhaps from Arabia or from modern northern Iraq following the star. Imagine what dedication that required.

When we consider this aspect of their journey, we must ask ourselves: How willing are we to actually undertake our sometimes long, arduous spiritual journeys? How willing are we to move out of our comfortable lives or our comfortable pews to follow God's revelation to new, perhaps, unknown places? How willing are we to go the entire distance of a spiritual journey? Let me share a brief story about three men, unlike the Magi, who held back from completing the journey: It's called "The Parable of the Cave", by Paula Ripple: Three seers were encouraged to find what had been called the cave of wisdom and life. They made careful preparation for the challenging and arduous journey. When they reached the cave, they noted a guard at the entrance. He assured them that they would have a good guide to lead them into the regions of the cave, but they must answer one question before they could enter:

"How far into the cave of wisdom and life do you wish to go?" The three travelers took counsel together and then returned to the guard. Their response was "Not very far. We just want to go far enough into the cave so that we can say that we have been there." The guard showed none of his great disappointment as he summoned someone to lead them a short distance into the cave and then watched them, after a very short time, make the journey back to their own land.

Their journey into the cave of wisdom and life had very little depth. This is true of the journeys of many of our Christian brothers and sisters: we enter into the spiritual world just a step or two, get a taste at what might be possible and then move on back to our routine lives.

So to re-iterate: Question One: "How prepared are we for the spiritual journey that God asks us to take? Will we recognize our epiphanies when they come to us?; Question Two: "How willing are we to actually undertake our sometimes, long, arduous spiritual journeys?; and now, for the final question: The Wise Men most likely experienced confusion and discouragement on their journey. Their appeal to Herod for help was met with deceit

and manipulation. But because they remained open to God's guidance, they were warned in a dream not to cooperate with Herod. Then after that long trip, where do they find Jesus, but in a stable? This must have been a confusing place to find a King. But continuing faithfully in their journey, they stopped at the manger where and when the star stopped moving and worshiped the King. They did not second guess God. So, the third and final question is this: How resilient and resolute are we while on our spiritual journeys? How discouraged in our faith journeys do we become when we confront roadblocks? How well are we able to hold onto our faith when things don't make logical sense to us? When others discount us from continuing on these journeys? Only by persevering, by remaining hopeful in the face of discouragement and doubt, can we open ourselves to the epiphanies that await us.

Conclusion:

How then can we remain hopeful and constant on our own journeys of faith? I'd like to close by sharing an epiphany I had at a key spiritual juncture in my life. I'll call it my journey "out of Manhattan". The year was 1995, and I had completed my rigorous battery of psychological needs in order to be considered for the priesthood. The Commission on Ministry in the Newark Diocese had approved me for postulancy. At the same time, I had recently been given tenure, promoted to full professor and appointed the Dean of Faculties at the Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service next to Lincoln Center in Manhattan. As Frank Sinatra used to sing, "it was a good time, a very good time." But, there was a decision looming. Was I going to go to seminary full-time and therefore give up my tenure, my academic position or was I going to piecemeal-it and do seminary on a part-time, catch-as catch-can basis, and protect my academic position.

Almost unequivocally, except for my wife, Peg, and my spiritual director, an Episcopal nun on 113th Street, everyone said, "play it safe; stick with your original plan to be a worker priest serving a parish on weekends." What you have is good –keep it. But in my prayers and my Scriptural reading, God was telling me otherwise. Was I hearing God correctly? Was it God or my own voice? But I knew – I knew God's voice was different from my own.

So, the day came when I summoned the courage to act on God's directions and went in to tell the Dean that I was going to become a priest, and had decided to begin Yale Seminary the next fall. I had my resignation letter in hand. No, she said, I won't accept your resignation. This is what we will do – I will ask the Jesuits to fund a sabbatical year, arrange for a replacement Associate Dean and when you return, and give you your position back; we'll work out a schedule in both places. She went on to say that she had been called to be a nun as a young woman, but had not accepted that call and often had regretted her decision. I should go, she urged, where God called me. Become a full time priest and be alert to how God was breaking into my life.

I was absolutely astounded by God's revelation in that exchange. This was but one of the many epiphanies I was to later experience. My brothers and sisters, God has left the light is on for each one of us and God has left the door open. Our task is to see the light, and let it guide us home. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*