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AMDG

Epiphany, January 7, 2018

Today we hear the very familiar and very beautiful story of the wise-men coming from the east, following a star to gaze upon the newborn king, in overwhelming joy. It is our celebration of Epiphany, the great revelation of the Christ child to the world.

And, I wonder what could have motivated these men to make such a long and dangerous trek, looking for the fulfillment of a prophecy from holy books that weren't even from their faith. What were they seeking? Well, what they were seeking - and what we all really seek - is to know who we are, who God is and what our relationship to God is. As Thomas Merton has said, these are the great questions of life, and the central questions of prayer, "Who am I, and who are you, Lord?" All we ever have to go on are little slices of life - the glimpse of a star, a baby in a stable, our accomplishments and failures, our great journeys and quiet moments of reflection and prayer. Yet we all seek what the wise men sought.

A few years ago I came across an old hiking guide of the Catalina Mountains that I'd stuck away and forgotten. It was well-worn and falling apart, and as I flipped through the book I noticed something that I hadn't seen before. On one of the introductory pages there was a photograph of some people working on a trail, and much to my astonishment, I was among them. It wasn't a real clear picture, but my 70s era hang-ten t-shirt, was unmistakable, as was the mop of dark hair. I don't remember the photo being taken, and I barely remember that event. It was clumped together in my memory with all the other scouting and outdoorsy things I did back then. And, after all those years of having that tattered book, I never bothered to look at the picture close enough to notice myself in it.

As I peered at that forty-year old photo I wondered about who I was then, how people saw me. I wondered what that teenager might have been thinking at the time, what his dreams were, what his fears were, what he thought of himself and the world around him. Sure, I remember some of the things that made me tick back then - the things I was

interested in, who I was hanging around with, but I was a mystery to myself then. In some ways I still am now. That old photograph captured a slice of my life, a billionth of a second, and preserved it. That moment of trail-work, and the many cares and preoccupations that were going through my mind at the time, and that were “oh so important,” were just a tiny piece of the complex person I was then and an infinitesimal example of who I am in Christ. No photograph, no description, no painting or poem can even begin to tell the story of how wonderful we really are, as the marvelous creatures God created in his own image and likeness. That is the mystery of the Incarnation, and what we have been celebrating during this season, the Epiphany of our identities in God revealed in Christ Jesus.

This principle of Incarnation in a nutshell means that God’s nature - infinite, eternal, source of all reality...and our human nature - finite, fragile, created; are revealed in Christ to be inseparably intertwined. This true nature was rooted with Christ in God from the origins of the universe. And, in our human freedom to realize this, to manifest this great reality of our true natures, in that freedom we have gone awry, become confused and disordered, closing ourselves off instead of opening up; holding on instead of releasing; saying no instead of yes. So, the Word of God, took on our broken human nature. God’s response to our brokenness and confusion was to become identified with us in our brokenness and confusion. That is the entire story of God’s redemptive act in Jesus, God became human, that we might realize our full potential through the preciousness of our fragility and brokenness.

But, we persist in our confusion and brokenness. We have a hard time understanding that we are created in the image and likeness of the Creator. Rather than surrendering to the infinite goodness of love and manifesting that love in the world, we tend to believe that we are our own selves, separate, independent actors. It’s as if, at the bathroom mirror some morning, our reflection looks back at us and say, “Thanks for everything, but I think I’ll go it alone for awhile.” In our futile attempts to seek identity in separateness, we lose sight of who we really are. I believe we all know this deep inside. When we see others struggling to puff themselves up, to make themselves greater than they are, we shudder inside, because we know it’s futile and false. And, when

we see unrealized potential in others, people crippled by fear, shame, and resentment, we weep inside, because we know they have lost their way. We know these things, because they are true, and they are us. Self-will run riot. In our attempts to fully live as God intended, we fall short, we lose sight of the image. All our efforts in work, in play, in vice, and in virtue, how we use our wealth and who we respond to adversity, to a greater or lesser degree are our attempts to define ourselves and understand our place in the world. But, just like that picture I found of myself from so long ago, our desires and deeds are but a fraction of who we really are, because our true identities are tied up in God through Christ.

The spiritual journey letting go of our attempts to identify ourselves, and fall into our true identities in God. And, I've come to believe that it is not in the answers to "Who am I?" or "who is God?" "Or what does God want of me" that we find God, it is in the process of discovering the answers that we encounter the divine. It is when we are fully engaged in the mysteries of life that we are fully alive and thus fully connected with the source of all light and life. Through grappling humbly, honestly and determinedly with the challenges of relationship, in discovering our talents and gifts and learning to use them in service of others, in striking out on puzzling journeys like the wise men. It is in living this gift of life that God becomes less of a mystery.

The Rev. Peter Gomes, renowned homilest and professor at Harvard Divinity said - *Mystery is no an argument for the existence of God; mystery is an experience of the existence of God. Very much like suffering and joy, mystery can often be that place in which we come to know better who God is and who we are.*

Through mystery - the mystery of ourselves and each other in honest relationship, the mystery of suffering and joy, the mystery of grace, the mystery of spiritual adventure- it is through these mysteries that Gomes suggests we come closest to knowing God...and ourselves. It is in living that we catch glimpses into the reality of our being, who we really are, and see the face of God. And in gazing at the resplendent face of God that the fullness of the great mystery that is our being is reflected back to us.

Most of us won't have to journey across the deserts like the magi, though many may choose to make pilgrimages that engage them in the spiritual quest. The journey of the magi brought them back to themselves – the great King they came to witness, turned out to be the great King in each of them. They came humbly in their wisdom; vulnerable in their majesty; fragile in their greatness; and before that manger, it was not their gifts of wealth on which the child looked kindly, but on their openness and humility. What these kings received in return was a glimpse of their own invincible preciousness in God.

The great Epiphany, what Christ came to reveal to all of us, is not just himself, but ourselves, our true selves, each a part of this beautiful Light of God. And, each one of us has a divine call to shine for the healing of the world. Epiphany is the season in which we can explore all the ways in which God has been made manifest in our lives. And what remains, is how we respond to that love. Let us pray, that as we enter into this new year, that we open ourselves to God's work in our lives, that we may arise, shine and manifest his light in the world. Let us pray this prayer of surrender by Charles de Foucauld

Father,

I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you:

I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures -

I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul:

I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.