

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12]

I don't know how many of you have made a "pilgrimage" in your lifetime – going on a long journey to a sacred place that is important to one's belief and faith. For some it is Rome or Lourdes or the Holy Land; for others it is Graceland or the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

I know that many years ago, when I visited Universal Studios in California, I had to touch the side of one of the three DeLorean cars which were used for the movie trilogy, "Back to the Future." AND I got the autograph of Walter Koenig, who played Chekov on Star Trek. He signed a souvenir clipboard which I used to compose my homilies for the first ten years of my priesthood. He wrote: "Wishing you the best of all worlds... And I'm sure you know which one that is!"

A pilgrimage involves both time and space. It involves traveling from one location to another, generally of some distance, usually over a long period of time. For the pilgrim, the travel time can offer an opportunity for prayer and reflection, and the distance often requires penance and pain of some kind, even if the mode of transportation is convenient, like an airplane.

A pilgrimage can be a time of humor and fun as well, as is recounted in Chaucer's famous Canterbury Tales. If you haven't read them, it's a treat! Pilgrimages have been with us for centuries, even for thousands of years.

In the cold mountainous regions of northern India, travelers warm themselves by placing burning coals in small vessels. With the vessel wrapped in a cloth, travelers can carry their own personal "fire" with them on their way.

Once upon a time, three men were travelling equipped with such vessels on their way to a holy place. One of them saw several pilgrims suffering with the cold, so he took the fire out of his vessel and lit a fire so that all could warm themselves. Everyone survived the cold that night and lived to journey another day. The next evening, as it grew cold and dark, the second man took out the fire in his vessel and lit a torch so that everyone could walk along in safety. At this, the third man scoffed. "You are all fools," he shouted. "You have wasted your fire for the sake of others." In response, the travelers said to him, "Show us *your* fire!" When he broke open his vessel, there was no fire, no light, no warmth – only ashes and dead coals. One person had given warmth with his fire; another had given light. But the one who kept the fire only for himself was, in the end, left in the cold and dark of his own making.

Today's feast of the "epiphany" or "manifestation" of God to all peoples speaks to this little parable: "Show us your fire!" With the birth of Jesus Christ, a fire has been lit of love and compassion, peace and justice for all people. The Feast of the Epiphany shows us that Jesus has made the fire of faith and hope available to all people who seek it, who embrace it, who live it in their daily lives. Through this sharing, the fire of God's peace and love, justice and truth will light the way for all, and warm the cold darkness that keeps us from God, from grace, and from full communion with one another.

Like any fire, that which has been entrusted to us by Jesus must be tended or else it will go out and be extinguished. If the fire is not available for everyone, then it will burn for no one.

The light spoken of in today's First Reading sees Jerusalem as the holy city, the one point of light in an earth covered in darkness. Blessed by God, the light of Jerusalem's holiness will attract all other nations to it. The wealth all these nations will bring with them as tribute will enrich not only the Temple, but all of Israel. The "tribute" means that all nations would be subject to Israel. With the ongoing unrest in the Middle East, it is obvious; this has not yet happened! You can see why Orthodox Jews still believe that the Messiah has not yet come. Jerusalem has not become the gathering place of all nations of the world.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul uses the word "stewardship". Literally, it means "household management." Here it is in the context of the stewardship of God's divinely revealed message which Paul, as a responsible steward and caretaker, hands on to all people: Jew and Gentile alike. There is to be no distinction or exclusion.

Today's Gospel is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah from today's First Reading. It says that a star guides the "magi" – a word from which comes the word "magic." And that might be a part of the "magic" of Christmas: that if we look for that star today, it will guide us where we need to be. God can use any variety of media to serve His divine purpose. What we believers are to keep in mind is not the METHODS used by God, but the MESSAGE God wants to give us. We should not be so preoccupied with the MEANS of communication, that we miss the essence of the MESSAGE.

Pay attention to the first reading on this feast of the Epiphany. We hear in Isaiah, "Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you" (Is 60:1). What does it mean to rise up in splendor? To

rise up means to awaken from one's slumber. In the case of Isaiah, it is the slumber of despair. The kingdom of Judah was forcibly removed from their land, the very Temple where the presence of God dwelt.

And now, at last, that presence has returned. Splendor denotes a brilliant luminosity. Splendor means glory! The source of this splendor is not the kingdom of Judah's own excellence. Rather, it is the glory of the Lord that is the light that shines into the darkness of their despair. At last, in a world devoid of meaning, there is hope. It is not a self-generated hope, a phantasm of the deluded. The hope is from the God who is the light of the world.

And He is the light of the world. He is not the light of those who have earned it. He is not the light of a small sect, hidden in a cave. Judah was exiled, Jerusalem was destroyed so that all nations might come to adore this God. That is the glory, that is the light, that is the hope.

On this feast of the Epiphany, this glory shines once more. The Magi, through the wisdom of a star, find their way to a hidden babe. He possesses no power. He shows no glory. And yet, they do homage before the newborn King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. The nations have come to Jesus Christ, dear friends. The glory of God has shone.

And that is what we remember on this feast. Christmas is not the feast of the privileged few who are sanctified. Christmas is the event that opens a new horizon. The glory of the Lord is meant for every man and woman.

And that glory, dear brothers and sisters, it shines. It shines more than any convoluted light source that we could construct.

It is the glory that shines upon the face of the man or woman dying in the COVID ward this Christmas, all alone.

It is the glory that gives hope to the young man or woman, trying to figure out the meaning of their lives.

It is the glory of the Catholic who darkens the door of our church but once or twice a year, on Christmas and on Easter Sunday.

God is light, the light of the nations, the light that shines even now. This no mere metaphor, no pious hope.

The darkness of death, of despair, of hopelessness, will be illuminated and glorified through the light of the Word made Flesh.

God dwells among us. Not apart from the suffering of this world. Right here, right now.

The words of the Scriptures open to us a horizon, a vista of hope that changes everything.

What left is for us to do homage, to bend the knee before Jesus, the one whom all nations come to adore.

What have you learned so far in your pilgrimage of faith? What lessons can you share with us about life and love and faith? With today's feast of the Epiphany, it is the revelation that Jesus became one of us and began His own earthly pilgrimage, for our salvation and for that of all the nations. We need to keep showing each other the fire of our own faith. That is what hope is all about. AMEN!