

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

When someone hurts us, what do we most want? Healing, or revenge? Reconciliation of the relationship, or the humiliation of the one who caused us harm? Even if we're kind, gentle souls, there might be a tinge of grievance in our injured hearts that seeks some retribution before things can be made right.

In Isaiah's prophecy, we see the once ruined Jerusalem receiving honor upon honor. Her humiliation -- apparent in broken walls, shattered leadership, and a plundered temple since the time of their exile -- is changed to glory. The whole world might be darkened with clouds, but divine light pours over Zion. Though nations once laughed at Israel's destruction, now every nation flows in her direction. The powerful come to Jerusalem, and lay their wealth at her feet. What a vision! "Lord, every nation on earth will adore you!"

It's what you call an epiphany: a manifestation of God's glory. An epiphany shows us familiar things but with a renewed vision. At the time Isaiah is writing, Jerusalem is a wreck of a city. The temple hasn't been rebuilt. The city walls are still smashed. Those who've returned from Babylonian exile are hungry and desperate. They don't see a shining city on this hill at all. Far from it. Isaiah invites them to see a transfigured Jerusalem, to see God's dream for them.

To capture and possess that dream, the people have to let go of the desire to strike back and punish their enemies. They must look beyond division to a time when even their enemies will be allies, and all will live in peace. The down-payment on this dream has already been made: The historian Herodotus claims that magi from Persia read in the stars that a child would be born to create a new empire. That child was Cyrus, who liberated the Jews from Babylon and sent them home to Jerusalem. The restoration of Israel began with Cyrus, predicted by those mysterious magi. And King Cyrus was no saint!

Six hundred years later, the restoration of Israel is completed as other Persian astrologers once more interpret the nighttime sky, announcing a child born to rule. Israel is again trapped under the burden of history, crushed by occupiers, with no hope in sight.

Were they prepared to abandon ways of retribution and vengeance, to receive enemies in peace? Never mind the international implications. Are WE willing to live in the shining city right here, within our own families and communities, in this very city?

“Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.” The Magi were “wise men,” Gentile seers who combined astronomy and astrology to divine religious insights from the skies. Here is another example of faith and science informing each other. Naturally the star attracts the magi and leads them to find its meaning. But for them to really find out who Jesus is, they must first learn from the Jewish scripture -- the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.

While visiting the churches of the City of Rome when I was a student there, I was amazed at how many churches had an intricate mosaic tile on the entrance floor of the 12 zodiac signs set in a circle. I thought, “This looks more like a pagan temple than a church.” But perhaps in this depiction there was an underlying affirmation of the connection between the physical and the Christian world. Pure faith and true science DO inform each other!

We might feel the same discomfort with the story of the Magi. Three pagan astrologers discover a path to the infant Jesus from a star? What this story celebrates, though, is that Christ came in the world to reconcile the physical to the spiritual. In the same way, He came to reconcile all peoples. If they might come to Christ through the stars, so they must.

The Magi symbolize several things: the need for revelation to inform natural knowledge; the Gentiles’ willingness to accept Jesus as the Messiah; and the pilgrimages of religious seekers who set out on long, risky, and uncertain journeys to find the source of their faith.

Why did Herod want the Christ Child dead? Because the little one away in a manger was being called the “King of the Jews,” a title reserved for Herod himself. Anyone contesting that title was a political rival who had to be eliminated. If Herod ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy!

But we find out that it is God, not Rome, who designates the Messiah-

King, and that though He first appears among the Jews, Gentiles also welcome the revelation, the “Epiphany” of their true ruler.

Ponder these questions this week:

The Feast of the Epiphany is about the divine mysteries becoming known.

How does the light of Christ shine in your life?

What “epiphanies” have you had?

How does the world around you reflect the glory of God?

How does what you know through faith complete what you know through the natural world, through science?

How are you a light of hope for others?

Happy Epiphany Sunday! AMEN!