



Epiphany 2011 (A)
Matthew 2: 1-12

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+O God with us, open our minds and hearts to the knowledge and love of you, our hope and our Redeemer. Amen.

One day last week returning from Downtown Crossing on the Orange Line, I was studying a commentary on today's Gospel passage. I was seated. At one point, I looked at a young man right in front of me studying or praying the Koran, beautiful leather bound, embossed and small edition. I could see that the text was in Arabic.

Then, I looked across the train and saw a middle-aged man also praying from the Koran. Then, I look to my left and another guy was studying a paper bound commentary on the Book of Daniel in Spanish. So, there we were: Four guys in close proximity to one another on a commuter train, after work, praying and studying about God and God's manifestations to humanity in different resources, all the Word of God written down for humanity to grow and mature in the knowledge and love of God.

On one level, the scene was a scene of contrasts: I with Christian Scriptures, two others with Muslim Scriptures and another with Hebrew Scriptures. I was amazed and found myself asking God, "What does this scene mean? What should I interpret from this experience which I had never had before? What did that brief moment in time communicate to me about God and humanity's thirst for God?" It was a scene of contrasts.

What about the contrast between light and darkness? Perhaps, we could think about the contrast that exists between what we can see when there is light and what we can't see when we're in darkness. What about those times which are *in between* light and darkness? You know, a gray area, a shadowy place where there is some light, some darkness, and space in between.

For all of us, wouldn't it be great if our lives were full of sunshine and light? You know, light day in and day out, a light that illumines our paths not unlike the light of that great star that led the wise men to Bethlehem. For some of us, living more in darkness is our experience, an experience of life that is hard, difficult and anxious.

My guess is that most of us live in the 'in between' experiences of light and darkness. We live in the shadows of life, sometimes in the light and sometimes in darkness but mostly somewhere in between. We long for light, search for light and sometimes we just simply can't see it.

Today's passage from Isaiah contains rich and profound language with words such as "thick darkness, light and brightness of the dawn."

The passage from Matthew tells us about a great light, a star that was so bright and discernable that people could actually follow it. Astronomers some time ago researched the time period when it is believed that Jesus was born, 4 B.C. E. They suggested that there was a great star in the heavens, a star that could possibly have been that light described in this beautiful literary masterpiece from Matthew.

Here, we see these wise men led by a star to Bethlehem. Other than that, our knowledge of them is that they encountered Herod but were wise enough not to return to him. Most of what we know about them is legend that developed in medieval times when the Church actually gave them names.

The Eastern Church believed that there were twelve wise men. The Western Church settled on three because of the description of gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Psalm 72 tells us about kings from Tarshish, Arabia and Saba offering gifts and bowing down before the King's Son.

Perhaps, the role the wise men play in Matthew is really that of humble servants not that of kings. They were led by a star without fanfare, no angels singing "Glory to God in the Highest" as the shepherds had experienced.

Jesus, lying in a lowly manger, was in stark contrast to the image of three perhaps wise, learned and kingly figures. Yet, they came and paid homage. They sought no honor for themselves but bowed down before the King of Kings, Jesus, the Christ.

These magi, as we have come to call them, were practically antithetical to what the image of a king was in those days. Herod was a king who lived in great palaces and great splendor. Jesus was born of Mary in some kind of stable or humble dwelling in stark contrast to Herod or other king of the day.

Perhaps, our readings for Epiphany call us to consider just to whom does God manifest God's self and why? If we look at the ill-respected shepherds and then by contrast to the wise perhaps wealthy individuals bearing gifts, I think *we* might fall somewhere 'in between.'

Like the shadows of life where we experience glimpses of light and darkness, we experience light and darkness in our spiritual lives as well. For me, I often find myself in that 'in between' space, a kind of liminal or thin space where light and darkness are contrasted. My spiritual life just rolls along without much fanfare and oftentimes with less energy than I would prefer.

I believe that God manifests God's self to each and every one of us, a kind of level playing field. We are called into relationship by a loving and illuminating God. We are called to be light for others, a light so that others experience of God through us, an experience of Divine light.

God breaks into our world so that we can experience light even in the midst of darkness, pain, sorrow, disappointment or grief. God breaks into our world at unexpected times and through unassuming people and circumstances even on the 'T.' But, we have to be open to those experiences so that that light can penetrate our lives, transform us and give us the energy to go forth to illumine the path for others.

The shepherds were transformed by their experience of the Babe of Bethlehem. The wise men were transformed by their experience of the Babe of Bethlehem. We are transformed by our experience of that child lying in a manger, and we are filled with the light of Christ. O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord! Amen.