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AMDG

Epiphany - observed January 12, 2020

Identity is a major theme during the season of Epiphany. On the surface, the lessons shed light on the identity of Jesus. Each one is a gradual unfolding of Jesus as newborn king, as teacher and prophet, as beloved Son of God, and as the Christ. But, it's not just discovering who Jesus is that's important in Epiphany, but discovering who we are in the light of Jesus, a gradual unfolding of our true identities in God.

In today's Gospel story it's clear that the visitors have come to pay homage to Jesus. However, it's not clear who the magi were, how many there were, or even if they were all men, since the Greek word magi is gender neutral. Over the years they've become wise men or even kings, and we count three of them because three gifts were mentioned. But the word magi in the ancient world, referred to magicians or wizards. The followers of the ancient Persian religion Zoroastrianism, who were deep into astrology, were called magi. So, it's interesting that in Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels, we are told that some of the first to recognize the significance of Jesus' identity are non-Jews, outsiders, guided by astrology, a practice explicitly forbidden by Jewish law. King Herod finds out about the visit of these astrologers, then asks his Chief Priests to confirm from Scripture what he has been told. Herod confronts the foreigners before they reach Bethlehem and tries to elicit their assistance. And when Herod realizes Jesus' true identity he reacts violently, massacring innocent children in a vain attempt to kill Jesus. These are two starkly different reactions to the identity of the newborn Jesus – foreign astrologers offering gifts and paying homage, and then the so-called king of Judea trying to eliminate him. Isn't this a curious beginning to the Gospel that was written to give reassurance to the people Israel? It must have challenged many people's preconceived notions of identity - their own and of others.

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, as well as in the other Gospels, everyone tries to figure out who Jesus is. His parents and family members struggle to understand his actions. From his prison, John sends

others to ask him if he is really is the Messiah. His followers puzzle about his identity. Even his closest disciples project their own expectations of who they think he should be and are reproached by Jesus. And, as Jesus' true identity and mission become clearer and clearer, the reactions of the people run the gamut - from awe and wonder to disappointment and even hatred. Jesus sparked strong responses from those he encountered - Herod and the Temple elite, those he cured and forgave, and his disciples. Because in their encounters with Christ, people got a glimpse of their own true natures. Some responded with violent resistance. Others experienced transformation in the discovery of their true selves as beloved.

How do we identify ourselves? Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, Anglican? Republican or Democrat or Independent— fiscally conservative and socially progressive? Blue collar, white collar, retired? Are you White, African-American, Hispanic, Native? Mac or PC? The trouble with all these categories is that they're superficial and don't define us completely. The divisive political climate we're in reveals that as an American people we are a much more complex and polarized than we understood. And that division has brought to light some of the darkest aspects of our identity as Americans. The problem with labels and positions is that when we link our identity too closely with a particular group or position, our egos take over and have to defend that group or position. It's the tribal instinct of our lesser selves. This is the root of all the "isms" that plague us - racism, sexism, nationalism, conservatism, liberalism.

But those "isms" are not who we are; rather they distract us from who Jesus calls us to be. Our true identities, naturally indwelling, our inner being with God – those identities are revealed, not in our various affiliations, but in Christ Jesus. It is Jesus who reveals to us who we really are. As we encounter Jesus – in the stable, teaching in the synagogue, healing in the hills of Galilee, on the road to Jerusalem, transfigured on the mountaintop, suffering on Golgotha, on the road to Emmaus, or on our own spiritual paths - as we meet Jesus, fully grounded in his own belovedness, fully aware of the divinity of his humanity, fully connected to all Creation; we also become aware of our own belovedness, the divinity of our own humanity, our own connection

to God, to each other, and to all Creation. There is no other purpose in knowing Jesus, than to know our true selves - each one of us unique images of a loving Creator, each one a manifestation of the wisdom of God in its rich variety.

But meeting the Christ doesn't just bring understanding of our own true identities. It necessarily means letting of who we thought we were.

Because when we look upon the loving Christ, we also see what does not match, those dark things in ourselves that are inconsistent with being the light of Christ. Although we are the Image of the Creator, we have to release our self-made masks, our superficial identities, and gradually allow God's presence within us to shine. To be born anew in Christ, means we have to die to the "isms" that keep us separated from God, that keep us separated from each other and from Creation. And, throughout our lives we are given many opportunities - many small deaths - to let go of fear, resentment, anger, and shame, to let go of the things that keep us from fully living out our belovedness, that prevent us from being a force for good in the world. That is our journey. That is our path, to realize our belovedness, to die to our false selves, and to fulfill our divine purpose as God's power for good in our hurting world. The journey of the magi brought them back to themselves – the great King they came to witness, turned out to be the sovereign in each of them; and transformed them into instruments of God's love. The great Epiphany, what Christ came to reveal to all of us, is not just himself, but our true selves. This is the truth of Epiphany, "the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things." Do you know that you are the beloved? Do you know it in the deepest recesses of your being, the power that you have within you? That you are each a part of this beautiful Light of God, called to shine for the healing of the world? How will that love shine through you, in Christ Jesus?!?

Collect

O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.  
Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.  
Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

The Psalm

Psalm 72:1-7,10-14 Page 685, BCP

Deus, iudicium

1

Give the King your justice, O God, \*  
and your righteousness to the King's Son;

2

That he may rule your people righteously \*  
and the poor with justice;

3

That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people, \*  
and the little hills bring righteousness.

4

He shall defend the needy among the people; \*  
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.

5

He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, \*  
from one generation to another.

6

He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, \*  
like showers that water the earth.

7

In his time shall the righteous flourish; \*  
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.

10

The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, \*  
and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.

11

All kings shall bow down before him, \*  
and all the nations do him service.

12

For he shall deliver the poor who cries out in distress, \*  
and the oppressed who has no helper.

13

He shall have pity on the lowly and poor; \*  
he shall preserve the lives of the needy.

14

He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, \*  
and dear shall their blood be in his sight.

The Epistle

Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see

what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

#### The Gospel Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.