

Epiphany

There is an old Bavarian custom of chalking the letters G M B (for Gaspar, Melchior, Balthasar, the “3 Kings”) on the wall of each room of the house on Epiphany morning. In years past, at Cronan’s on Epiphany, colored chalk was distributed to parishioners who would mark our own homes with the symbolic message. In my home, we marked the lintel over the back door with GMB and the year’s date. The letters ended up there on that lintel for years, and typically we’d forget what the original message was.

So what is the real meaning sought by these strange sojourners of the letters?

In the Western Christian tradition, there are 12 days of Christmas, the last of which is its culmination, the Epiphany, commemorating the Magi visiting the newborn King, Jesus, announced to them by an enormous “star” in the sky. Interestingly, the only reference to these men in the Bible is in Chapter 2 of the Gospel of Matthew, and they’re not called “wise men,” or “kings.” There’s also no mention of how many there were. Matthew only describes them as “Magi from the East.” Perhaps they were Persian priests who followed the star by divine inspiration. Matthew explains that soon after Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, ruled by the Jewish Roman King Herod, “some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the East, and we have come to worship him.’” According to the Gospel, the men then followed the star to the house where Jesus, Mary and Joseph were and presented him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

These gifts of the Magi, gold represented wealth and power, suitable for a king. Frankincense was a type of incense used for worship in the Temple, perhaps suggesting the high priesthood of Jesus. Myrrh was used as a perfume and in ancient Egypt, in embalming processes, and which Christians have interpreted as foreshadowing Jesus’s death. Whether astrologers, wise men, magicians or priests, the Magi’s occupation as well as their gifts don’t really matter. What is most significant is that Matthew’s gospel, directed to a predominantly Jewish audience, is basically saying that the Messiah for the Jewish people is the Messiah to everyone on earth.

This story is Matthew’s way of claiming that the Messiah, the “King of the Jews,” has come into the world to reach out to all the world, Gentiles included. The Epiphany, the “manifestation” of God, is God’s disclosure of the divine’s True Self. That manifestation is in the form of a vulnerable newborn infant, who is totally dependent upon human care to sustain his life.

I spent Christmas with my family in Denver. My daughter, Leah had just given birth to little George on December 7. I gladly spent early mornings feeding George, allowing his parents a few more precious hours of needed sleep. During those dark, quiet times, I felt myself witnessing a miracle of sorts. And I couldn’t help but wonder about the infant, Jesus, absolutely vulnerable, completely dependent on the care of those around him. And my wonder moved on to the question of why did God choose this particular manifestation of God’s Self?

I don't have a ready answer to this question, since it really is a mystery. But it seems clear to me that our God, the one who long ago promised salvation to a small tribe named Israel, has yearned to connect intimately with all people and all creation. Perhaps in the manifestation within a newborn, God has made God's Self completely accessible to all. No judgment, no intimidation, no power over. Rather, God comes to us as a gentle invitation to become open and trusting just as God is. And may we, like the holy Magi, make our way seeking and journeying in moments of awe and wonder to find the Holy of Holies in the forms of the most vulnerable.

--Cathy Hartrich