

The Light of All People

One fine December day, I was out and about, doing some visiting. While driving along, I happened to turn on the radio and catch part of a broadcast of Gian Carlo Menotti's one-act opera, "Amahl and the Night Visitors." It's the story of a poor first-century widow and her disabled son, Amahl, who receive an unexpected visit from three travelers on their way to offer gifts to a wondrous child.

Travelers who come in darkness. Travelers nearing their destination after a long, long journey, guided only by the light of a star. They're fictional portrayals of the very travelers Matthew tells us about in the gospel reading for this Epiphany Sunday.

They seem so familiar to us. They turn up every year, on Christmas cards and in nativity scenes and in live Christmas pageants, usually portrayed by kids decked out in bathrobes.

But what do we really *know* about them? The only biblical mention of them is here in the second chapter of Matthew. After which, they disappear from view. Christian tradition, handed down to us, suggests that they were kings. But no gospel

evidence supports that royal status. We think of them as a threesome. But the Scriptures say only that they bring three gifts.

All we really know about them is that they come from the east. Probably from Persia, the region of modern-day Iran or Iraq. They're practitioners of the secret arts. Dream interpretation. Astrology. Maybe even magic. Matthew calls them *māgi*. Your English-language Bible might translate that word *wise men*. Scholarly members of a priestly caste who observe the stars and their movements.

Who see in the western sky the rising of a new star. One they've never seen before. In their time, it's believed that the appearance of a new star signifies the birth of a great ruler. So they set out to follow that star. And they wind up in Judea.

Now if you were a Jew living in Jerusalem at that time, these travelers —with their odd blend of science and religion— would have seemed about as different as you can get. Now the Law of Moses does not condone anything associated with the occult. So to most Jews, these star-gazers are just plain strange. They're outsiders. Foreigners.

Israel, in its earliest days, has focused on establishing boundaries around itself and on keeping those boundaries fixed firmly in place. There's to be no mingling with foreigners. Either you're a Jew—either you're one of the chosen people—or you're not.

But between that ancient time and the time of Jesus, Judeans have been conquered, and the survivors taken into captivity. After decades in exile, those returning to their homeland find only devastation and ruin. Return to a world of deep darkness.

To this people enveloped in darkness, imagine what hope Isaiah's prophecy must have offered! In today's first reading, Isaiah promises blessed light. The light of the Holy One of Israel, shining on Jerusalem. Light that will draw all nations to it. And when they come, gifts for the rebuilding of community will be brought. By the nations.

In the biblical language, the same word that gets translated *nations* can also be translated *gentiles*. A gentile is anyone who's not a Jew. Who is outside the community of faith.

And that, of course, includes you and me. We're gentiles. Paul lets it be known to the Ephesians that he has been chosen

for the mission of bringing the good news—the gospel light—to gentiles. In the early church, we gentiles were the outsiders.

But in two millennia, haven't we somehow morphed into *insiders*? Haven't we come to consider ourselves to be on an inside track? And don't we prefer to be around like-minded people? In many twenty-first century churches, don't members hope people will join who think the same way they do? Who dress the same way they do? Who worship the same way they do?

Sometimes church people are suspicious and mistrustful of anyone who seems different. And not only church people, of course. Ours is a polarized society. According to Ken Kesselus, it's a society with an *us versus them* mentality. "Us [versus] them...liberals [versus] conservatives; Westerners [versus] Middle Easterners; Muslims [versus] Christians; rich [versus] poor; male [versus] female; native [versus] foreign."

Some foreigners, according to Matthew, have journeyed to Jerusalem. They've been following the light. Seeking the Light. But what first confronts them is darkness. The darkness of one of the most paranoid rulers who ever grasped power in his clutches. The darkness of the murderous heart of Herod, who

knows that there can be only one king of the Jews. Who plots to destroy the perceived threat to his regime. Just a few verses after today's reading, Herod gives an order. And the horrific killing of Bethlehem babies begins.

And Matthew lets us listen to the cries of the inconsolable parents of these little children. Parents whose pain we can't imagine.

It's not easy to hear. We wish Matthew hadn't told us. We don't want the slaughter of innocents to be part of our Christmas story. Part of our Christmas season. But it is.

Two thousand years later, it's *still* part of our story. Children still die. Violently. Parents still weep and mourn. And we wonder: *Where is God? Where is God in this?* In today's reading, the name of God isn't even mentioned.

Yet God is present. Unseen, yet fully present. Active, at work even in and through the darkness. Setting a star in the western sky. Leading, guiding the magi—and leading, guiding God's people today—to circumvent every Herod of this world. *God is present*—ensuring that light shines in the darkness and that the darkness *does* not and *will* not overcome it. Will *never* overcome the light!

The māgi found the Light they'd traveled so far to find. You know how the narrative ends. With God's help, they outwit Herod. With God's help, they don't go back the same way they've come. With God's help, they leave by another road.

These first gentiles to seek and to see the Light are radically changed by their encounter. They're no longer the same.

These māgi who bow down and worship. These māgi who open their treasure chests and present their gifts.

Today we too bring gifts to the holy child. Like the nations—the gentiles—of Isaiah's day, let's bring gifts for the rebuilding of community. Gifts that break down barriers. Gifts that cross boundaries. Gifts that build bridges between "us" and "them." Gifts that reach out and make connections. Gifts that bring people together. Gifts that invite and include and welcome. These are the gifts that gladden the heart of the One you and I worship.

And after you offer your treasure and yourself to this One, to this Jesus, he offers himself to you at his table of grace. There, he offers you—and he fills you with—everything you'll need to continue on your journey.

So arise, shine, beloved. For your light has come. The Light of Christ Jesus has risen upon you, has transformed you. And you will never be the same. As you leave this place, you set out to travel a different road, another road, into a brand new year. And the Light will be in you. The Light will reflect on you and from you, for all to see. You'll become a beacon shining into the darkest corners of this world the brightness of the One who is the Light of all people.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.