

The Feast of the Epiphany (Observed)

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Today's Gospel story is one that is well known in folklore, and one that marks great celebrations in many cultures. Growing up outside a liturgical tradition, I still knew that January 6 was the official date of the Feast of the Epiphany, when we celebrated the arrival of the kings to worship Jesus. I knew this because it marks the availability of King Cakes - complete with a plastic baby inside which we all seek to find, which we will have after the service. But be aware - if you find the baby, you have to bring the next cake!

Many cultures celebrate this day as much or more than Christmas day itself, and gift-giving is often done on this day as well, because it commemorates the occurrence from which that tradition comes. Perhaps there is a lot to be learned from that - because after all, the gifts are one of the few things we know about in this story.

The men that came were Magi - astrologers who were followers of the Zoroastrian religion, which still exists today. They are unlikely candidates to come and worship a newborn Jewish peasant. And that is part of the mystery and miracle of this story. Unlike Jews, they would have no ideas around the coming of a Messiah, and yet because they were watching, they were open and aware of the working of the divine, and so they set out on a journey to be in the presence of someone special, something sacred.

I doubt that they knew exactly what they were searching for, what the meaning of this baby was, and yet they set off. And I doubt that they really knew the meaning when they arrived, when they saw him.

How could they know? Could they have known that they were staring down on the fullness of God *in diapers*?

I don't doubt their wisdom or devotion - I doubt they fully knew because I doubt we ever fully know the meaning and power when we encounter the sacred, when we face the fullness of God among us. We rarely can articulate the meaning when we encounter God in our world. We simply know that we have entered a thin space, that the veil has been temporarily torn or lifted for a time outside of time when we become part of a reality that is larger than we knew. The change in us is not a heightened correctness of theology or doctrine, but an expanded knowledge of ourselves and our life that is found in our profound, deep connection to each other enacted by this God in diapers, who is drawing us all together no less now than then.

And that is the core of this story - this child was born for all the world, for all the people none of us could imagine being brought into this incredible work God is doing in our world.

There is much tradition about what happened to the Magi after their encounter with Jesus, but in the Gospel, we are only told two things - they left gifts and they went home by another road.

The gifts - the thing we know most definitively about the magi, and so the source of much discussion. The mention of three gifts is the reason that there are traditionally three kings. They seem like strange gifts for a baby, even one thought to be royal. Myrrh is particularly strange as it is often pointed out that it is used for burial.

Since the first centuries of our faith, much was made of the symbolic value of those gifts - gold for his kingship, frankincense for his divinity, and myrrh for his humanity - thus making a statement of the incarnation and identity of Jesus. Although these are meaningful as symbols, I learned this week for the first time that the gifts likely had practical value. It does seem strange to give them to a baby because in fact they were *not* for him directly.

Both frankincense and myrrh had healing qualities that were often used after childbirth.¹ Frankincense was used as a pain reliever and calmed anxiety and depression. Myrrh is a pain reliever slightly more powerful than morphine and was often used to prevent infection after childbirth. It's likely that these gifts were given to care for Jesus in the best way one could at this point - by caring for his mother.

It's easy to forget with all the other strange and miraculous stories around the birth of Jesus that *it is no less than a miracle that Mary survived.*

Childbirth in ancient times was dangerous in any case. Mary gave birth in a stable, which made infection likely, and if she was as young as we tend to think she was, this was even more dangerous to her. And if Mary did not make it, the odds were not good for her newborn son - a fact that probably didn't escape these strangers from the East. Even if they did not fully understand the true identity of this special child, the wise men knew something important - that the best way to care for him was to care for his mother. The odds were very much against Mary, and in those early days and months, the destiny of this child was dependent on her survival.

While much of the Christmas story is hard for us to relate to because of its setting in antiquity, this is a part that tragically *has not changed in 2,000 years*. Complications from childbirth and pregnancy are the leading cause of death in girls under 15 in developing countries,² where 85% of the world's population lives. *In all likelihood, the birth of God among us would be nearly as life-threatening to Mary now as it was then.*

¹ Insight from [Pulpit Fiction podcast, Episode 44](#)

² World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/>

We cannot stop and think this is a problem 'over there', somewhere else. Our country is the only advanced economy where maternal mortality rates are rising - after reducing it by 99 percent in the last century, it has now doubled again in the past few years.³

In some states such as Mississippi, more women die in childbirth than many third-world countries, with rates especially high for African-American women. And more women will continue to face life-threatening complications and death if we reduce access to basic pre- and antenatal healthcare.

And that is a tragedy, not just because it is a sad reality but because *we have the resources to change that reality*. In their bestseller *Half the Sky*, which I strongly encourage you to read, New York Times writers Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn explain that during the first World War, more American women died in childbirth than American men in the war. Yet maternal mortality plummeted in the next two decades as women won the right to vote and our society gave basic resources to provide for maternal health.⁴ The same result has happened in developing countries when maternal health is seen as the human rights issue that it is.

The problem is that this, like so many others, is seen as a 'women's issue.' The journal *Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology* explains, "Maternal deaths in developing countries are often the ultimate tragic outcome of the cumulative denial of women's human rights... Women are not dying because of untreatable diseases. They are dying because societies have yet to make the decision that their lives are worth saving."⁵

I'll read that again, "*They are dying because societies have yet to make the decision that their lives are worth saving.*"

That is the tragedy. Lives are worth saving. And that is not a women's issue. Slavery was not and racism is not a black issue, the Holocaust was not a Jewish issue, and the oppression, discrimination, and apathy towards the women of our world will never be a women's issue.

You can hear these truths from many places - the fact that these lives are worth saving is basic ethics and morality, and it is simply true economically as well. But for us as followers of Christ, as worshippers of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it is essential to our very being, to our very life. I am convinced that it is an issue no less at the heart of our God now than it was 2,000 years ago when the life of his only Son hung precariously in the balance.

In this story, in exactly the place of the possible tragedy averted, we see the beauty and mystery of the Incarnation. We see the fullness of what humanity was created to be - born

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/24/why-pregnant-women-in-mississippi-keep-dying/>

⁴ Kristof, Nicholas D.; Wudunn, Sheryl, *Half the Sky*, 2009. Kindle Locations 2239-2243.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 2243-2246

utterly dependent on a poor girl of a captive people. In this moment, their lives were likely saved by foreigners of another religion and race because they were all open to the work of God in an unimaginable encounter - Mary and Joseph already open to sharing the possibility that this child might fulfill the hopes of more than just Jews, and the Magi seeking the sacred wherever they were led, paying homage to God in diapers, and caring for his life so that he may survive to fulfill the hopes that met there that night.

There in that encounter, they all offered to each other what they could not bring themselves, giving life itself to each other - life with meaning and purpose, life with love and fellowship, life that we are all created to live and that was shown for us as that God in diapers grew up and lived among us, died at the hands of the fear that threatened his life from those earliest days, and rose again to bring us new life together that will never end.

In the birth of God among us, God wrapped in diapers that the Magi came and worshipped, we see not only the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity, we see the bringing of heaven to earth. Something incredible happened in that moment; something was already changing the world that brought Magi to care for a Jewish peasant.

In the Incarnation, we see God doing a new thing in our world, beginning a new way of being in which all that divides us is reconciled, all our wounds are healed. This is a new way which announces that tragic realities that have gone on too long will not go on forever, a new way which gives us the hope that God is changing our world and we can be part of it.

When we fail to realize that lives are worth saving, we have forgotten this. We have forgotten that we are all created in the image of God, and that means all of us *together*. We are not the image of God alone. We are not the image of God surviving independently, caring for ourselves and those most like us. We reflect the image of God when we realize our deep need for each other, when we live in the eternal fellowship for which we were created. As John Donne much more beautifully wrote, the loss of any person is a loss to me.

This is not about the lives of women; this is about the life of us all. In the Incarnation, the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity came to be one, showing us that life and being at their very core are about sharing life. We need each other to live in the image of God, and all that inhibits and threatens the full potential of any of us is a threat to the life of us all.

Among us, the fullness of God is pleased to dwell. Are we open to it? Are we searching for God's presence among us, especially in the most unlikely places? Are we willing to bring what we have and do all we can to care for the new life we encounter?

If we do, like the wise men, we can never walk back on the road from whence we came. We are changed by the encounter and will never be the same.

On this Feast of the Epiphany, may the fullness of God be revealed among us today.

Amen.