

Fr. Keith Boisvert
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Feast of the Epiphany (C)

During the season of Advent we sang *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* and listened to fellow parishioners witness about the “Glimmers of Grace” they have experienced in their lives. Now we come near the end of the liturgical season of Christmas to this Feast of the Epiphany when we celebrate that Emmanuel is indeed in our midst. An “Epiphany” could be described as a large “Glimmer of Grace”. In this particular Epiphany, the Magi (who are not Jewish, and not particularly religious, but rather leaning toward science and astrology) are quite surprised to follow a star and encounter the presence of God—in, of all things, a Jewish infant—and wind up prostrating themselves and doing homage. They are radically changed by the unexpected experience of discovering the divine in their midst.

In her book *Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul*, Rabbi Naomi Levy shares this encounter with a congregant:

Pray for me, Rabbi, is probably the most common request people have made of me over my years in the rabbinate. I am always honored to pray for people. But, of course, I worry when people ask me to pray for them. Are they asking because they don’t think God will listen to them? Do they think prayer requires a correct formula and, if they don’t know the magical incantation, that their cries won’t be heard?

Once, about twenty years ago, I went to visit a man in the hospital. He said, *Pray for me, Rabbi. I don’t know how to pray*. I said, *Of course I will pray for you. But first, tell me, what is it you want me to say to God?* He thought for a moment and then began trembling as he spoke: *God, I am Yours, I know that. But I belong here with my family. My heart is aching. I’ve never let myself love like this before. Give me time. I pray to You, God, give me time*. These words flowed from the soul of a man who felt he didn’t know how to pray. When he was done he sighed deeply, and I could see the worry and tension depart from his face. A calm overtook him, a light, a grace. I witnessed with my own eyes how prayer heals. From that moment on, any time someone asks me to pray for them I always ask the same question, *What do you want me to say to God?* And it never fails. People

astound themselves with words they didn't know existed inside of them. The soul speaks of its own accord.

Rabbi Levy's question and the thoughtful answer it elicits is an experience of "epiphany": the manifestation of God's light and presence in our midst. As the magi undertake a long and arduous journey searching for the newborn king by the light of the mysterious star (encountering, among other things, a murderous tyrant along the way), a congregant in pain and despair finds the peace of God within himself, thanks to the sensitivity and wisdom of a wise rabbi.

Several years ago, on this very Feast of the Epiphany, we had just finished Mass in the gym, and I was greeting people on their way out. We had begun hanging the flags of our nationalities on the wall of the Gathering Space there (at that point, we only had about 18—now we have 70 in the narthex ceiling!), and the African Choir had led the music at Mass. An older Caucasian woman stopped me, and started saying (while wagging her finger at me), *Fr. Keith, I have lived in Frederick my whole life, and I just want to tell you that this is not the way Frederick used to be...* As I prepared myself emotionally for her to tell me she was leaving the parish, she continued ... *and I love it this way!* She had a big smile on her face, and I gave her a big hug. She had had an epiphany, an experience of God's light and presence, and she had been changed by it.

Back in early December I received a collection of pictures of my mother electronically from one of my brothers and sent him a thank you note. I received this note back from him:

Thank you for your message and glad you enjoyed the pictures. It was fun putting together with everyone's contributions. I miss Mom everyday, especially on my bad days, but still talk to her. Speaking of Mom, on Saturday I was in Giant looking at flowers. A woman dressed in a nursing outfit and her co-workers came up next to me and were looking at single roses. She commented she *would like to buy Miss Jones a gift for her birthday-- but \$6 for a rose???* I asked if she works at an old peoples' home. She said *yes, a nursing home*, and told me which one. I recognized the name. She started walking away not wanting to part with her \$6. So I grabbed a rose, took it to her with the \$6, and said *give this to your client for her birthday*. She was very grateful-- then I turned and walked away, and uncontrollably lost it right there in the store while thinking of Mom. 😞

Having known my brother for over sixty years, I can say that this was an epiphany for him.

We all experience such “epiphanies” in our lives: moments of revelation and understanding, discoveries of possibility and potential, new appreciations of the love of God in our homes and in our hearts, and in the people around us. In times of great joy and accomplishment-- and in times of turmoil, sadness, and disappointment-- the love of God is manifested to us in the most hidden kindnesses, and in the barely visible light of everyday compassion.

The gospel writer Matthew teaches us, through the Magi’s experience, that God is sometimes not encountered without leaving our routine and following something as tenuous as a star and a dream. But doing so can lead us to our own experience of epiphany. We have a choice of what “stars” we follow in our lives, and are invited in this Eucharist to fix our lives on the great star of God’s Christ-- evidenced in peace, compassion, mercy, justice, and forgiveness—so that we can behold Emmanuel-- God in our midst.

What stars are you following these days.....?