

Isaiah 60: 1-6, Matthew 2: 1-12 The Gift of the Magi

What a blessing it is to gather together in worship on this very New Year's Day 2023. Happy New Year. In my native Japan, it is a cultural phenomenon rooted in the indigenous religion of Shintoism for people to turn out *en masse* to a nearby Shinto shrine, at the strike of the midnight on New Year's Eve, to pray for divine favor in the year that has just begun, but only after having listened to the 108 strikes of the bell of purification coming from a nearby Buddhist temple... and having eaten the skinny but long Soba noodles, a symbol for longevity.

Still others opt to stay up or get up very early to catch the first sun rise of the year, preferably from the top of Mt. Fuji or from a beach facing the Pacific Ocean to the east, for it was believed from ancient times that the "god of the year," who brings prosperity to each home, would appear with the first rising sun of the year, and it was considered good fortune to witness it.

Growing up a "good Christian" in the Land of the Rising Sun, I missed out on all those. It was only after I left for the US that my father, who was quite irreligious, started taking my mother to watch the first sunrise of the year on a regular basis. Apparently, it was an awe inspiring and hope-filling experience even to a nonbeliever.

"Arise, Shine, for your light has come." "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

The words of the prophet Isaiah given to us this morning made me wonder, if I could have gone to see the first sunrise on the shore of Japan, with my love for Jesus still intact. I wondered if, beholding the radiance of new dawn alongside my Shinto and Buddhist friends, my love for my God, the God of Israel revealed in the Bible, the Creator of the Universe who is the source of all Light, might have burned even stronger in my little heart.

In fact, I wonder, had I gone there, my heart might have expanded a little, a Grinch style, and I might have experienced more deeply the boundlessness of God's light that was and still is dawning on all peoples who walk in darkness and drawing all peoples to God.

Any doubt about it was swept clean by the Gospel reading for this morning, the story of the Magi. The wise men from the East, from a foreign land far from Judea, saw the light, this time not a dawning light but a bright star in the dark sky. By the wisdom of their own traditions, (perhaps they were star experts of their day) they discerned that the star was leading them, non-Jews, to a child born king of the Jews, and drawn by its light, they were compelled to follow it to find the child, so that they could "pay him homage." A first border-crossing story in the NT. And the border will be crossed and crossed again in the life of this king.

The Magi. They were non-Jews, outsiders to the faith of Abraham. In the Christmas pageant, they arrive with an exotic flair, because they are foreigners from a strange land; they are on the periphery; their existence is marginal to null in the story of Israel and their God in the Hebrew Scripture.

And yet, they represent all of us who are non-Jews. As Christians in America, we are very comfortable locating ourselves at the center when reading the Bible that is the New Testament; we don't read the Bible from the margin. But as Gentiles we would not have been in Jesus's inner circle; we are the ones on the margin. The Magi remind us of that.

And the good news of the Matthew's Gospel is that these foreign characters on the periphery of Jesus's world are the first ones to come seeking the new-born king of the Jews. Matthew tells us, from the very beginning, Christ came for all as the savior of all. Matthew saw it coming in the words of Isaiah and elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, this boundless reach of God's saving arm. This is a great gift to us of the Magi story.

Speaking of gifts, even though Matthew doesn't say how many wise men there were, we've come to assume there were three, because three gifts are mentioned: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts have become inseparable from the wise men, who are by now promoted to being kings. And while these details occupy prominent places in our imaginative memory and in the Christmas pageant (hopefully we'll have one here someday), we miss an important detail in the story.

“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.”

“Pay him homage.” It's a rather strange term. We skip right over it to the offering of gifts, perhaps because it goes with the strangeness of the Magi themselves; must be a cultural thing they did. But let us pause and consider this, because “pay him homage” actually appears three times in this short passage: at the beginning as the reason the Magi set out for the journey, in the middle, as the King Herod's excuse to find out from the Magi the whereabouts of Jesus; and at the end, as the mission accomplished by the Magi. It was the driving force and the purpose of the journey the Magi made, the journey they set out without knowing where the Star would lead them.

“They knelt down and paid him homage.” The Greek word translated here as “knelt down” actually means “falling” down. And the word translated here as “pay homage” actually means to “prostrate oneself, as in falling flat on the ground face down.” So, in a Christmas Pageant faithful to the text would have the children playing the wise men out of reverence “falling down” and prostrate themselves on the ground, before Jesus, before handing out the gifts.

Though it may feel foreign to many of us, it was, and still is an act of worship in many religions including many branches of Christianity. It's a sign of

one's submission and surrender in reverence to the authority before you. Because you express it with your entire body, it engages your heart and mind as well. It's an offering of one's entire being. Because it brings you to a physically vulnerable position, it is deeply humbling. It requires full trust.

To prostrate themselves before the child was what the Magi came to do, to show total devotion to this foreign king in whom they recognized the universal, Divine presence. It was their reason to go on the journey and it was the goal which, once accomplished, they went back to their country, their lives having transformed by that act of worship.

The NIV translates the word simply as "worship," but it is far more involving and engaging of one's core than the challenge of standing up and down several times as we do in our worship.

I have heard an account of a young Presbyterian seminary student who befriended a monk in a well-known Catholic monastery. he was fortunate enough to be invited by the monk friend to spend some time in the monastery. He got to eat with them and work with them, side by side as if he were one of them. Then came the time for worship and prayer. One after the other, the monks full-on prostrated themselves on the floor, but, having done everything else side by side with them, this Presbyterian seminarian could not bring himself to prostrate, which must have baffled everyone, and to his monk friend's great dismay. But their friendship did survive this.

If literally prostrating oneself is not our language of worship, how can we recapture this sense of full engagement of our whole selves in worship? It is not the form of prostration but the intent behind it that is life-transforming, because that's what worship does. God loves us and calls our whole being into God's being. We walk into the presence of the Divine, with our whole being, in mind,

body and spirit, and be transformed to become the vessel of the Divine Love and Intention in the world.

What if, this New Year, as a spiritual practice, each of us took an intention to engage our whole selves, mind, body and spirit, as an act of worship, in whatever context we are called to be, whether it's home or church, school or hospital, bar or restaurant; whether you volunteer or as a way to make living; we are called to worship. It is not a new idea, of course; Paul says, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Then he goes on to describes different ways we engage our whole being in service to one another. I wonder what it would look like for each one of us, individually, and together as the body of Christ, the church. Fully engaged body of Christ. Imagine that. That's what God is calling us, now.

I know what happened to that young seminarian who could not bring himself to prostrate with the monks. He left the monastery, went back to the seminary, and became a community organizer of a pastor for his entire career, offering every bit of himself in service to the communities of God's children through the church. He may never have learned to prostrate himself, but he learned to live his life as an act of worship.

The light of the New Year has dawn on this Valley. This valley is dotted with many bright spots that reflect the Divine light. At the heart of it, as a church that is the body of this newborn King, what can our worship look like this year? It is an exciting journey. Let us walk into this new dawning light. May God bless us, each one, as we come together to worship this newborn King, together with the Magi, with our whole being. Amen.