

Feast of the Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; and Matthew 2:1-12

When I married my husband, I simultaneously became mother to his three children, including one with Down Syndrome. People ask me now, "How did you do that?" I confess, "I was in love; I didn't really think it through!" I loved kids; it would be easy. But my children did not like being outside, reading, eating healthy food or any of the things I loved to do. And the departure of their birth mom early in their lives had broken them. What had I gotten myself into?

I wonder if the Magi felt this way. They were recognized as experts (magi) of astronomy and of what else we do not know. They were "from the east," which simply means far away. They were unfamiliar with Jewish religion, culture, history and geography. Because a new star indicated a new ruler, the Magi went to the capital city, but they must have been surprised by the paranoid, power-mongering Herod and a city caught up in his bad leadership. How had no one noticed the change in the sky? Herod tried to ensnare them in the plot he was already weaving to destroy this newborn contender for his throne. The Magi continued on, undeterred. The star reappeared, causing them great joy, and they entered the house where the star stopped. They enter a humble home, and found a baby, just a baby, on the lap of a woman they never would have noticed, in an obscure town with a stunning prophecy attached to it.

Following a star! Do not bother with finding scientific explanations for this star; it is an invitation to find what theologian Karl Rahner called the holy mystery. Each of us is always wondering, pushing for more, asking questions and never satisfied. We feel the longing to move toward God, who is wholly beyond us and yet, woven into every thread of our lives. We spend our lives following stars that appear in our skies, intriguing us and taking us into lands we never imagined. As we figure out each new situation, we are invited deeper into the holy mystery that is God. No, we do not arrive at an answer that satisfies completely; God is not a subject to be mastered. We are always taken by surprise by someone or something very different from us and we have to respond. Like the Magi, we must honor what we find, by listening and loving, rather than conquering and fearing. Being authentic is all we must do. Such a little thing, yet so much!

The mystery revealed to the author of Ephesians is this same holy mystery. Revealed does not mean solved, as in a who-dunit novel. Rather, the writer has come face to face with a divine surprise that invites a change. Eph 1:9-10 says, "God has made known the mystery of God's will... set forth in Christ... to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth." The specific form this gathering up took in the first-century, eastern Mediterranean was uniting Gentiles and Jews. How strange this must have been to consider! How hard to change centuries of "us-vs.-them" culture! The Jew-Gentile divide may seem trivial to us, but it was a paradigm shift. Closing it rocked people's worlds.

God continues to invite us into this same mystery of inclusion today. We need it now as much as ever. We limit our friend groups and even leave family members out of our lives. We exclude people from our neighborhoods and churches. We shut out based on race, age, gender and sexual orientation. We close our borders, even to the desperate. However, God is moving us toward unity: those we exclude are "coheirs, members of the same body and copartners in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel."

If becoming more inclusive seems hard, Isaiah 60 encourages us. It begins with two imperatives: "Arise! Shine for your light has come!" We have what we need; God, after all, is running this show. Then two more imperatives say, "Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you." If we arise and shine with the graciousness of God, people will come to us. They will bring supplies we lack and it will be glorious. These four commands to participate and be aware of the mystery encourage us to honor with a full and authentic heart all life presents. Rejoice in the star and find God!

- ❖ When has life served you up something unexpected that changed everything for you? How did you come to know God in a new way through that experience?
- ❖ How do you exclude others now? Talk with God about how to change that.