

Feast of the Epiphany
January 4, 2009
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The Search for Meaning

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6
Matthew 2:1-12

In a recent Dilbert cartoon, two coworkers are talking to one another. One tells the other, “This is my first recession. How worried should I be?” The man’s question gets the answer, “You’ll be fine as long as you don’t have any hopes and dreams.” The first man responds, “But I still have them.” The second worker pessimistically replies, “It’s time to yank off that band-aid.”¹

As you know, there is a lot of pessimism, fear, and discouragement among people right now due to the economic recession. As we start a new year, news anchors and columnists are busy discussing if this year is going to be better or worse than 2008. Most tell us to expect it to be worst. They tell us in varying ways that we should be very concerned about our hopes and dreams, which, according to the “experts,” rarely survive such bleak economies. It is in this climate, that we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany.

The Epiphany is a feast that can offer us a lot of hope in the midst of pessimism, fear, and discouragement. In the Early Church, there was an ambiguity about the Epiphany. Various preachers at various times applied the term “epiphany” to celebrations such as Christ’s birth and baptism, the visit of the magi, and the miracle at Cana. The reason for this is because the Greek word that we translate as “epiphany” means “to manifest” or “to show;” and, all those events are, in fact, manifestations of Christ. In the Western Church today, the Feast of the Epiphany is the celebration of the wise men searching for and finding Christ.

For Italian Catholics, the Feast of the Epiphany is a time for retelling the story of Le Befana. According to the legend, Befana was a mean old woman who did not like children. One day, while she was cleaning her house, she saw three men with an impressive caravan going past her house. She invited the three pilgrims into her house for some food and rest. The three wise men explained to Befana that they were following a star that was leading them to a new-born King. They invited her to go with them, but she declined saying that she had a lot of house cleaning to do.

After the men left, Befana began cleaning again. However, she could not get the good news about the baby out of her head. She decided to grab some treats and run after the wise men. Despite her best efforts, she was unable to find them. As the legend goes, Befana continues to this day to roam throughout the world, leaving treats with all children, hoping that one of them is the King the wise men told her about.

¹ Click here to view the actual strip on-line: <http://dilbert.com/strips/comic/2009-01-02/>

The story of the wise men and the legend of Befana remind us that we are to persistently search. Unlike Befana and the magi, however, we are not searching for Christ. As Christians, we have already found Him! Instead, we are searching for His *direction*. We are His *disciples* and we desire to know His will; we search to hear His word about the circumstances of our lives. We search to know the Father's love in a new and deeper way; in a way that gives meaning to the chaos of our world; in a way that provides hope in the midst of pessimism, fear, and discouragement.

It is never enough for us to simply tell God that we are fearful or discouraged. We need to be introspective and specific! An intimate relationship requires such specifics and introspection! Let me give a couple of examples.

Most parents consciously or unconsciously work toward and expect that their children will be "better off" than themselves. They hope their children will have better homes, more stable jobs, be wealthier, and be able to retire earlier. Our current economic recession has brought fear and discouragement to these hopes and expectations for many parents and children. Have we talked to Christ about our fear and discouragement? What is He teaching us during this difficult time? How is He turning our hearts from the things of earth to the things of heaven?²

A similar example would be the retired person or nearly-retired person who is fearful and discouraged about how the economic recession is affecting his or her retirement plans. This is a very real and difficult scenario for people right now. We have all seen more and more retired people being forced to go back to work. I have a good friend whose elderly mother has had to go back to work because she and her husband had their whole retirement wrapped up in stocks that dissolved into nothing. This has been an added burden for her because her husband has Alzheimer's and really needs her to be at home taking care of him, not working full-time. There are many, many people in similar situations right now. The Feast of the Epiphany reminds us to search, not so much for answers, but rather, for the God who comforts us when we're struggling. Saint Paul's struggle is a great example of this reality.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, we read that Paul suffered from something really horrible. He called it a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7b). His suffering was so great that he begged God three times to remove the problem. God, however, was not interested in "fixing" the problem, but rather, giving meaning, direction, and comfort to Paul in the midst of the problem. God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). This is what Christ does for *us* in the midst of pessimism, fear, and discouragement—He speaks words that offer eternal hope.

It would be very easy for us to either repress our fears and discouragement and not share them with God, or keep telling ourselves that there are people much worse off than us, but, in reality, this is where Jesus wants to manifest Himself—in the midst of our fears and discouragements. Christ's Epiphany invites us into a relationship where we can get eternal comfort in the midst of earthly difficulties. With the zeal of the magi and Befana, let us prayerfully search after the comfort, meaning and direction that the newborn King, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, desires to give us!

² Colossians 3:1-4.