

## Matthew 2, the Magi

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

January 2, 2011

by

Deacon Brian Bromberger

It was Christmas and 15 year old Robyn Stevens wanted to give her father a gift he would appreciate. Arthur Stevens, her father, was part of a tugboat crew in Hancock, Maine, so she thought a small waterproof flashlight would be useful and it wound up being her Christmas present to her Dad. A few weeks later, Mr. Stevens and the crew of the tugboat *Harkness* got caught in a storm, 25 miles out to sea. It was **very** cold, being the **dead** of winter, and in the middle of the storm, the tugboat's bilge pump, which removes excess water from the boat, **froze**. The tug began to sink. The captain radioed the nearest Coast Guard station, but they were **too** far away to do much good. As it happened, Vance Bunker, who lived on an island, not too far from where the *Harkness* was sinking, heard the radio call. He collected a couple of friends and they set out in his lobster boat toward the last location the tug radioed from, before the crew abandoned it. But it was terribly **dark** in the middle of the stormy ocean and they knew there wasn't much hope of finding **3** men in the **raging** water. Just as Bunker and his friends were about to give up and go home, they saw a thin beam of light shining straight up from the water. Arthur Stevens' little flashlight, that inexpensive, insignificant Christmas gift from his daughter Robyn, was frozen to another *Harkness* crew member's glove; and sailing toward it, Vince Bunker and his friends found the 3 half **dead** men in the water, arms locked together and pulled them into the boat. It was the light that saved Arthur Stevens and his crew mates!

And it was the light of the star which guided the Magi to safety as they made their dangerous journey to find the Christ child. Now there have been **all** kinds of theories as to what might have caused that star to burn so brightly: Halley's comet, a supernova explosion, a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the Aries constellation...it doesn't really matter. The Magi saw that light, whatever its origin, and interpreted it as a divine sign that needed to be explored. Scholars estimate that in those days, a major expedition like theirs, could have taken 2 years, especially since they were probably magi arriving from Babylon, having faced robbers, fierce rain and windstorms, and crossed barren deserts, among other hardships. And remember much of their journey was made **without** benefit of the star. It could **only** be seen at night, so traveling during the day they had only the vaguest idea of where they were heading. Much of their pilgrimage was made in the dark, advancing from one sighting of the star to the next, not seeing it constantly for long distances. The Magi had no directions, no Mapquest, no GPS, to guide them. They had no idea **where** the star would lead them, how **long** it would take, or what would be the **end** result. They knew **only** that they **had** to follow that star of wonder, star of night, **wherever** it led, for they were seeking the meaning **behind** this sign in the sky. The Magi in their spiritual quest resemble the hobbit, Frodo Baggins, in *The Lord of the Rings*, who must carry the One Power ring on a long and perilous epic journey to be destroyed on Mount Doom in the deadly land of Mordor. He will be opposed by the most powerful

force for evil in all Middle Earth by the dark Lord Sauron. Frodo will stand up in the Council of the Great at Elrond and declare, “I will take the Ring, though I do **not** know the way.” The Magi did not know **the way** God was leading them, **but** they knew it **was God** leading them and that was sufficient. They were not only **starstruck**, but travel ready! Now **who** were these Magi? First, they were **not** kings, which comes from a later dubious post-Biblical interpretation based on two psalms and we don’t know if there were 3 of them or 20, **just** that **3** gifts were given. Originating in Persia, modern day Iran, Magi were star-gazers, astrologers, fortune tellers, and dream interpreters, with our English word magic derived from the Greek word Magoi. From the perspective of the Hebrew Scriptures, Magi were sorcerer wizards whose activities were denounced and prohibited by the Israelites. And yet **here** they were, worshipping the infant Jesus, a king found in the lowliest of places, rather than a palace surrounded by luxury and privilege, which was why they **originally** stopped in Jerusalem. Despite being condemned institutionally, the Magi were still embraced by God’s love, which respects none of our human made boundaries, with God willing to cross over **every** barrier. Ironically, Herod and the chief priests and scribes, those closest to the religious tradition, who **knew** the scriptures and prophecies about the Messiah, did **not** see or respond to the light, even though Bethlehem is **just** 9 miles south of Jerusalem, while the Magi, marginalized as blasphemous outsiders, when **they** saw the light, got up, and followed it halfway across the **continent** to the Christ child, becoming the **first** Gentiles to recognize Jesus’s divine identity. When the light of Christ shines in the world, the truth in human hearts stands starkly revealed—the Magi’s sincerity and humble reverence of Jesus as king as opposed to Herod’s duplicity and fearful, soon murderous rejection of Jesus. It’s not about how **we** search for God, it is **God** calling **us** to make the journey. Whoever is searching for the truth is ultimately searching for God, even if she or he doesn’t know it. The light of the star led to Jesus, the light of universal salvation for all people, Gentiles now included, with Jesus, the one who lies at the beginning and end of **all** of our struggles and arduous journeys. From now on, God gives Godself in Christ to **all** people in **all** places and at **all** times. That is why this event is known as Epiphany, which literally means to shine upon, to give light, or to appear. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes, “an epiphany is an experience that transforms everything and before you can do anything with it, **it** does something to **you**. It’s not something that can be controlled and it **always** seems to demand a change in people’s lives.” Thus, an epiphany is whenever God shows up or appears, such that **we** are able to experience a real **live** encounter with the presence of God, especially by leaving behind the familiar and accustomed and to go searching for the divine in the most **unlikeliest** of places.

**It** was late Christmas Eve, but in spite of his wife’s plea, George would not accompany her to church. The whole crazy idea of God becoming a human being made no sense to his logical mind. He stood watching the heavy snow at his picture window. He thought of the birds and wondered if they would find the seeds he had put **out** for them. It was snowing hard enough that the seed holders were quickly covered. He turned on the backyard lights, but both the birds and the seed were lost in the falling snow. Putting on his heavy coat, he went outside and opened his big barn door. Then he spread birdseed just inside the barn, hoping that the birds would see it. They did not! Still hoping to help these little starving creatures, the man tried desperately to shoo the little birds toward the door of his open barn - but they were **too** frightened. Here they

were only **inches** away from the food they needed and he was helpless. "If only I were a bird and understood their thoughts," he remarked to himself, "**I** would show them the way to that life-giving food." Just then the church bells began to ring announcing Christmas morning. Suddenly he understood why God's Son came to show us the path to eternal life in the way that he did – by becoming one of us. From then on George became a believer. This is the same insight that the Magi grasped, **now** recognizing what God had done for **all** human beings. They had come looking for the one who was born King of the Jews and instead discovered he was the Savior of the **whole** world, including them. God made Godself known to **us** in our **own** humanity. God came to **us** where we are. That's **why** the Magi were changed. And how did the Magi react when they found Jesus? They worshipped him by paying homage. Now paying homage in Greek, doesn't just mean you think someone is good or praiseworthy. It means saying to that person, "I'm yours. I belong to **you**. Where you tell me to go, I'll go and if you tell me to do something, I **will** do it." So the Magi aren't coming out of curiosity or admiration, but are putting their fate into the hands of this new king. They are declaring **who** will rule their lives from **now** on.

The Magi brought gifts and various interpretations have been given as to what the gold, frankincense, and myrrh symbolize. The Magi's **real** gift was their devotion, their willingness to endure **whatever** it took and however **long** it took, to walk a thousand miles in two years to discover what God had promised them through the star. The long walk is part of the gift. It is the gift of one's self; it is when you give yourself **fully** to another, for that is what happened when God gave Godself in Jesus. Matthew says they departed for home another way, which means they went back by a different route. But they also returned as different people, people whose hearts were filled with joy, whose lives had been transformed by their pilgrimage, which always happens when we meet the **living** Christ. The Magi embraced change even if it meant traveling back a new **unfamiliar** route, stepping out into the unknown; having been enlightened, they could never return home in the same **way** they had arrived. Only on **this** journey, the light was not guiding them overhead, but from within their own souls. The Magi were inspired to pursue their odyssey by the **same** question we are asking today during a time of recession high unemployment, possible global warming catastrophe, PG&E natural gas explosions, and invasive airline security measures to thwart terrorism. Where is **God** in all the **mess** of this planet? The Magi represent all who have wrestled for faith in a world that seems harsh, cruel, and arbitrary, where everything you have **can** be swept away in a moment. They stand for **all** who dare to hope that God is still at work even in the most desperate, seemingly hopeless, situations. The Magi found their answer in a child in Bethlehem and so must **we**. We're tempted to keep Jesus in the manger, as a cute, helpless baby who can't make demands on us, who can't entice us beyond our comfort zones. But God is calling us to take the light we find at Christmas and become Bethlehem stars ourselves, serving as a sign of the presence of God to others.

Lawrence described himself as a down-in-the-gutter **drunk**. He'd hold a job for a short time, getting enough money to survive in his little apartment, sober enough to take care of himself, for a while. Then he'd be fired, and the same pattern would repeat **again**. A friend kept nagging him about sobering up, about how much better his life **could** be, about how he needed a **dog**. Lawrence would just shrug it all off and say he couldn't **even** take care of himself, how could he **possibly** take care of a dog. There were **many** such refusals, until one day Lawrence came home to find this little dog in a cage on his

doorstep. His friend had taken action and there was nothing to do but bring the little dog in and feed it. Little by little, Lawrence noticed that every time he came home, the dog was there to greet him, delighted to see him. It was always a homecoming party. Regardless of how he looked or felt, sober, drunk, dirty, grouchy, whatever, there **was** the dog welcoming him home in a way Lawrence couldn't remember **anybody** ever doing. It took a while but Lawrence decided one day to find an Alcoholics Anonymous group, and soon he was attending twice a week. When he sent the story I've just told you to an author, Lawrence included a photograph showing him sitting on a couch, the dog sitting next to him, and his 5-year sobriety medal hanging around the dog's neck. God wants **us** to become an **epiphany**, a revelation of God's love and transforming power in the world. We are challenged to live in the light and take that light out into the world and reach out to **all** who suffer and are lost, just as Lawrence's friend did for him. On Epiphany we remind ourselves, in spite of the encroaching darkness, that the light is **still** shining. We don't generate that light on our own, but we reflect the light of the glory of God glowing within us and strive to remove those blinding obstacles that dim its inner radiance. Now many of us would like God to eliminate the dark depressing times of life. But God never promised to abolish our darkness and as we've seen, **even** the Magi often journeyed in darkness. Just like Robyn Steven's gift of light helped rescue her father Arthur, so the gift of light we are given in Jesus Christ, rescues **us** from surrendering to the gloom and darkness surrounding us. And because that light is **always** shining, despite the darkness, and because ultimately the darkness **cannot** overcome it, **we** always know **where** we are journeying, searching for our **true** home, so we can **never** really get lost. **Jesus** is the somewhere we need to get to! The Magi allowed the star to lead them in a most unexpected way to a most unexpected place where they found a most unexpected revelation and were joyfully permanently changed. My sisters and brothers, in this coming **new** year, are **we** willing to allow God to lead **us** to an unfamiliar unexpected place and be joyfully permanently changed?