

Epiphany of the Lord - January 3, 2016

Contained in the womb of Mary is the One whom the heavens cannot contain. He empties himself of the privileges of his divinity in order to enter another world, the world where human beings dwell. The Son of Mary is a stranger in a strange land. He comes from another world, the world of the divine Trinity.

The Eternal Word of God leaps down from his heavenly home to pitch his tent among humankind here on earth. He crosses the border between the eternal and the temporal to become forever a part of human history. Thus, the Son of God is THE Outsider, the one who comes from a place beyond our understanding. He is the Ultimate Stranger, an immigrant from a land so foreign that no one alive on this earth has yet seen His eternal home. The strangers from the east are the ones who recognize the presence of the Stranger from another world whose star rises brightly in the night sky. Outsiders who live beyond the borders of Israel are the ones who see how the Outsider has gotten inside our human flesh, how the radiant glory of the Divine shines forth in a little child.

The magi come to adore the newborn King, while King Herod plots to destroy him. Feeling his throne threatened, Herod's fear grows like a gathering storm. In fact, King Herod embodies the normal human reaction to the stranger, which is fear. Herod feels threatened by the newborn King and is deeply troubled by what this helpless child might do to Herod's position of power. Thus, he slyly tries to use the magi to obtain information on the whereabouts of the child.

When the magi go home by another way, Herod, full of fury, sends soldiers to slaughter the children in Bethlehem. Fear is the driving force behind Herod's cruel slaughter of helpless babes. Herod is so full of fear that he cannot see what the strangers from the east see—that the Son of God has taken flesh as the Son of Mary, that the radiance of God's eternal love is now embodied in Jesus. However, before the soldiers can kill the newborn King, Joseph, warned in a dream of the impending danger, takes Mary and the child and they flee to a foreign land, Egypt.

The Holy Family then experience what many families today experience in our country and throughout the world—what it is like to be strangers in a strange land, to start life over in a place far from home where language and culture are different, to be looked upon with suspicion because of being an outsider. The Holy Family survive their sojourn in a foreign land because some Egyptians recognized in the face of this refugee child the face of God's son and gave him and his parents welcome.

The most potent divisive force the early Church faced was how to welcome the stranger. The first Christians were Jewish-Christians, and they thought everyone who wanted to join the early Church should become Jewish first before becoming Christian. In fact, the leaders of the early Church in Jerusalem feared the Gentiles from other countries whom the apostle Paul was bringing into the Church. The Jewish Pharisee Paul had to first be knocked off his high horse before he could ever begin to recognize

Christ longing to be born in the Gentile people. But once Paul had the scales removed from his eyes, he saw clearly what God was doing in and through Christ His Son.

In Christ, Paul began to see that the Gentiles are now co-heirs of the kingdom, members of the same body of Christ. In Christ, the strangers who are Gentiles are also co-partners in spreading the Gospel. This revelation rocked the early Church to its core. However, because Peter, James, and the other leaders of the first Church Council in Jerusalem were converted and accepted Paul's teaching on this matter, the early Church grew and flourished. Otherwise the Church most likely would have folded up and died.

St. Paul saw how all people are estranged from God because of sin. But because Christ chose to become one with us and die for us, we are strangers and aliens no longer. We are now fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Paul patiently and wisely worked at uniting a Church made up of people who were strangers to one another because of language and culture. Paul preached this truth—there is something stronger than our differences, and that is our unity in Christ: Whether Jew or Greek, woman or man, slave or free, all are one in Christ. In today's world where so many Americans are fearful of strangers from other lands, this feast of Epiphany shows us a way out of the darkness of this fear. We can choose to walk in the darkness of this fear, and like Herod, try to get rid of those who we feel threatened by, or shut the doors of our hearts to them. Or we can walk in the radiant light of Christ the Stranger, of recognizing him present in the strangers who come to our parish, our city, and our country.

These strangers from other lands come bearing gifts for the living body of Christ here. Not gold, frankincense, and myrrh but other kinds of gifts. The gift of Faith—a confident, humble trust in God. The gift of Family—rejoicing in the gift of new life and in the God who gives life. The gift of Joy—celebrating the many gifts of God and thus remembering that God is in charge, so the crushing weight of worry and anxiety is lifted. When we welcome the stranger and receive the gifts they bring, we allow the light of Christ's love to shine through us and lead us to our heavenly home.

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