

A-Epiphany, 2008
St. Luke's, Renton
Kevin Pearson

If you're observant, you have noticed that the three wise men, along with their camels, have at long last made their way from the window sills over there to the crèche over here. What a journey that must have been. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were most precious items in the day, though they're odd baby gifts from our perspective. This is the image, this is the story, of today's Feast of the Epiphany: people wise in the Spirit, seeking to encounter God, make their way to the Christ, bearing gifts. Finding him, they are overwhelmed with joy. I've told the story before of my friend, Grant, who runs a house of hospitality in Managua, Nicaragua. Nicaragua isn't a place to which people go to tour the hot-spots, but a place where people of faith and conscience travel to learn about the special blend of Christian faith and practice exhibited in that land. So Grant opened an inn where there is room for people to come and see and reflect on their experience. He is fond of making the distinction between tourists and pilgrims. Tourists, he observes, travel to have a good time but seldom step outside of themselves. Whereas pilgrims make a trek to encounter the "other" and to be transformed.

I find it's a helpful way to frame how we consider religious life, or just life in general (which is fundamentally religious, whether we use that language or not). Do we approach religious life as tourists—people who travel through life for a laugh and a good time, or are we about the prospect of being transformed, enlightened, and encountering the great Mystery of life? The point of making a distinction is to make a point. It is not to say tourists are bad and pilgrims are good. God knows, I've done my share of touring, laughing and having a good time and I intend to do a lot more. The point is, or rather, the question is "What is my fundamental orientation?" "What shapes my searching and seeking?" "What am I for?"

Tony Robinson is a local preacher who now consults churches, speaks to groups, and has a good column in the P-I each Saturday. Please don't read it. Some of my best sermon ideas get generated from reading his column. In one of his pieces several months ago, he told a story of when he was working as a church pastor. He was standing at the back of the church after the service, greeting people as they were filing out the door. Just then, a woman approached him and lamented that she had not gotten much out of the service that day. Perhaps a little too quick-wittedly, Robinson responded, "that's OK, the service wasn't about you." Tony went on to comment that worship is perhaps the one place in American life where the design and intention is not all about us. Sorry.

In a time when churches are trying their darnedest to meet the every emotional need and desire of parishioners, in that column, Tony Robinson reminded readers that the primary point of attending worship is just that: to worship God, to approach the throne of grace, to, as our collect says, "be lead to God's presence where we may see God face to face." People go to church for lots of reasons, but if we loose sight of this central purpose of worship, and that it is about God, the whole religious project gets misshapen. Are we approaching our lives of faith as tourists—just visiting this life? Or are we willing to be pilgrims who find ourselves up-ended by grace and glory?

Today is the feast of the Epiphany—the completion of the Christmas story—where, Matthew tells us, wise men travel to Jesus bearing precious gifts and encounter the Holy One face to

face. In a previous parish I served in San Francisco, we invited religious scholar, Huston Smith, for an evening conversation about spirituality and religion. That name may ring a bell. Huston Smith is one of the truly legendary scholars of religion. He happens to be Christian, but is a student of the world's religions. He was popularized by a Bill Moyers series several years ago and his name became a household word. One of the many concepts or phrases Huston Smith has inserted into religious discourse and the concept for which I am most grateful to him is the phrase "primary religious experience." If anything, Smith is a student and witness of people's "primary religious experience," no matter the brand, or tradition through which they experience the Holy.

In this phase, Smith refers to human experience of encountering the Divine. For me, the phrase primary religious experience, simply by its utterance, says that this encounter is possible and others have had it. Secondly, the word primary connects to primal which means this occurs at a core human level. Thirdly, experience. This isn't an idea, it's not something to believe in. The phrase invites us, as does our liturgy, to taste and see the goodness of the Lord, to seek him face to face and we will never be the same. What is your face to face experience with God? Religion leads us there, the sacraments open us to the possibility, but what has been the clearest experience you have had of encountering the utter otherness of God, the *mysterium tremendum*, the *Numinous*, Being Itself, the Holy One? Was it cresting a mountain peak and standing before a vast wilderness landscape? Was it when your newborn child looked onto you like you were always meant for each other? Was it when you were down in the dirt defeated and someone spoke your name and showed you kindness?

What was your encounter? What is the journey you are on, having had that encounter? What is the journey you are taking toward that encounter? What is the journey of your life—of your religious life (which is your real life)? Are you approaching it as a tourist seeking giggles and gifts or are you gobstruck by the prospect of life lived with the Divine? Do you seek self-satisfaction or are you longing to touch something more real and more true? Are you resigned to what has been and ready for your nap, or are you curious about what is being churned up in you right ... now?

In Advent we waited and wondered and longed and pined and planned for God to come anew. Epiphany ... and this is why Epiphany may be my favorite season ... Epiphany is about God who is happening NOW. The old comedian Flip Wilson used to do an act where he was Reverend LeRoy of the Church of What's happening Now. And despite the flip humor, that's really the only church there has ever been. That's the only religion there has ever been. That's the only experience there has ever been. It's all happening now. What we remember from the past is an experience that is happening now, what we long for in the future is something we are experiencing now. There's only ever this moment right now. One long journey of life called now.

This is the moment you have been waiting for, searching for, longing for. So bring your gifts, orient yourself, not on yourself, but upon the Holy One of your life's longing. Seek the one who wills to be found. Make her your intention and your heart's desire. God manifests Godself in a ten thousand ways. How are you seeing God now?