

Christmas.Epiphany

1.5.24

My Dad loved to tell this story. There was a king who had two sons. One was an extreme pessimist. The other, an extreme optimist. The father wanted to temper his sons' extreme behaviors. So, he placed the pessimist in a room filled with the latest and greatest games and toys. The king thought to himself, my pessimist son will be overwhelmed with joy at the incredible toys and games which are at his fingertips. That will help temper his pessimistic outlook on life. The father then placed the optimist in a room which was mostly empty, except for hay and manure which littered the floor. The king thought to himself, my optimist son won't find anything of worth in this room. That will help temper his extreme optimism.

After an hour or so, the father checked on his boys. He looked in on his pessimist son and saw him sitting in the middle of the room. The boy sat there shaking his head. The father asked his son what was wrong. The pessimist son replied, "I can't play with any of these toys or games. I might break something or lose something. This is the worst day of my life."

The king father was dejected. He couldn't believe that his experiment on his pessimist son failed. So, he decided to check on the optimist. Before he opened the door, he heard his optimist son repeatedly shrieking with joy. When he opened the door, he couldn't believe how happy this son was. He asked his son, who was covered in hay and manure, what was going on. The son replied, "Dad, with all this hay and manure in the room...there has to be a pony somewhere in here."

The king's one son was filled with joy and hope. Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Epiphany. It is a day that is full of hope and joy.

In the gospel story, we hear about the Magi or Wise Men. They are foreigners. They do not follow the Jewish faith. But by studying the Hebrew scriptures, they knew a Savior would be born in Bethlehem of Judea. They also knew that the birth would be signaled by the appearance of a star. Most Jews would be suspicious of these foreigners. Normally, they would have nothing to do with them, since the common perception would be that they were a threat to the peace and viability of their families and their land. Despite that cultural prohibition, Mary and Joseph welcome these three into their home. The visitation of the Magi and the welcome these Wise Men received remind us that God came to save all people – not just those who are from our families, our community, our particular church, or culture. That reality was also displayed the day Jesus was crucified upon the cross. He stated from the cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Jesus' forgiveness and his offer of eternal life extends to all. What could be more hopeful?

The Magi or Wise Men were able to discern this great salvific event because they studied the scriptures and sought to see the divine made visible where others might have missed it. Compare their experience with that of King Herod. Herod's title was literally "King of the Jews". But he had to ask others about what was contained in the Hebrew scriptures since he had no familiarity with the Word. He also didn't notice the appearance of the star announcing the birth of the Messiah. While the Magi or Wise Men looked up, Herod was only concerned with looking around at the material world which surrounded him.

Overjoyed and filled with hope at what they see, the Wise Men present to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Each gift was carefully chosen because of what they represent. The gold indicates that this child is indeed a king. The frankincense, which rises to the heavens, indicates that this child-king is also divine. As such, Jesus enjoys the title Son of God. And finally, they give myrrh. Myrrh is an extraordinarily expensive perfume, used to anoint the bodies of loved ones when they die. This gift indicates that this child would sacrifice himself for the salvation of all.

What the Magi or Wise Men hoped for was manifest in the person of Jesus.

The Bible tells us that "they who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar as on eagles' wings. They will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint" (Isaiah 40:31). Certainly, that is what

happened to the Wise Men as they lived in hope after encountering the Messiah, Jesus Christ. It is that same hope which seeks to root itself in our hearts and be manifest in our actions.

As I mentioned in my homily at Mass on January 1st, Pope Francis recently announced that we are beginning a Jubilee Year. Jubilees in the Church celebrate in a more intentional way what God offers to us. They call us to conversion. They seek to help us live more like Christ for others.

The theme that Pope Francis is using for this year's Jubilee is hope. What an apt virtue to embrace as we begin this New Year. Pope Francis is calling us to live as people of hope this year in a very serious and intentional way. And, more importantly, he is calling us to be ambassadors of God's hope for others.

Many of those around us will preach pessimism, dark days ahead, gloom and doom. But born again by the hope that only Jesus can give, we live in hope - that with God we can face all things, endure all things, and do all things. Like that star which led the Wise Men to Christ, may the hope we live be a bright beacon which guides us and enables us to show Christ to others and to the world.

Amen? Amen!