

January 4th Reflection

The magi has arrived.

Imagine for a moment the scene unfolding. Peering with their oil lamps into the dark stone cave, the star gazers beheld the incomprehensible Love of God. They'd been led to this home-away-from-home by an extraordinary light in the night sky. The light settled its beams on of all things, a displaced family. Every gesture exchanged revealed to the star gazers that this family embraced their inheritance of grace and spiritual comfort in the midst of their circumstances. Impractical as it was, the star gazers, were so moved that they gave of their own means so that something of themselves could travel home with the newborn and parents. Having touched and been touched, they left the little family in their Bethlehem confines and began anew. Spontaneously and without regret, the magi heeded God's nudging to "go home by a different way." At this point we are reminded that, especially in their search for the Christ child, God pursued them across every geographic and spiritual terrain and they just as persistently pursued God's guiding presence.

Matthew tells us that none of the people we meet in today's gospel is actually "home"—they are all enroute, coping with the circumstances they encounter but not in familiar or comfortable surroundings. The Nazareth family is staying in their ancestral home of Bethlehem, but far from their loved ones. Herod is unable to be at home in his own authority because fear has caused him to cease to be at home within his own power. Sensing his pending diminishment in prestige, he clumsily tried to use the curiosity, courage and compassion of the sages to subdue that which he feared. The magi, overcome with curiosity, left distant homelands. And above them, the sky pitched a satisfying tent of signs and wonders. The intersection of the loss of home for this gospel's cast or characters, and particularly the journey of the magi, presents the great spiritual quest of Christian life: to seek God is to find God—and when found, God reveals a course for human living that is powerfully charged with the potential to transform the place where we stand into God's home—IF we are willing to go home by another way.

Today, we are the magi.

Having come to this place, led by the illumination of our oil lamps and God's grace, we're poised for God's home to flourish in our midst. We become the magi in ways that are meaningful for our circumstances. We have every reason to believe that Christ lights our way in this moment of human history.

It's significant, especially for us gathered here today, that Matthew does not feature the travels of *one* ancient star gazer—but rather focuses on the journey of the community of observers. From where each stood, they determined one way—maybe not the best way, maybe not the fastest or safest way, but the way the star seemed inclined to lead them. Jesus' hospitality, even from the vulnerable place of a crib, illuminated the journey for them. As the Community of Charity we learn from the illumination of Elizabeth Seton's incarnation. Like Elizabeth, we welcome home our God in each relationship that even as it deepens and becomes a very lifespring of comfort is moving us all toward the bittersweet inevitability of separation. We welcome our God by the light and warmth of hosting the stranger with dignified embraces, to spite our own vulnerability and fragility.

As a community of charity, we make the journey as the magi did: We go together because together we are wise seekers of God's nudging—alone we potentially forget the wonderment of the journey. We remind each other to be **curious** about God Incarnate by being curious about one another. One question presented in love can change the entire course of another's life. In our prayer and in our conversation, we nurture one another's fascination with God Incarnate—imagine the conversations among the star gazers who journeyed to the Christ Child! Sometimes intense, sometimes mundane, they no doubt conversed rigorously about what made them curious. The magi heard together God's whispering voice. But whispers are hard to decipher at times. Curious people pursue the sound until there is clarity. Alas, the magi discerned God was sending them home by a way they did not know and had not anticipated traveling. No maps, no certainty of safe shelter or food, no guarantee that the wilderness would gently receive them or spare them from the harshness that defined such places. BUT, deeply, they listened. We are no doubt hearing the whispers again in our day.

Just as the magi did, we acknowledge and appreciate the dignity, conviction and love of each person in our community of charity—without this community of charity, we can't move toward home in the same way. God's **compassion** rains down on us the gift of one another—the gentle encouragement when we're ready to give up; the honest insight we share in a simple evening meal together; the humor that sustains us in joking and kidding; the generosity that inspires endless pies for the Thanksgiving dinner at a local shelter; the comfort we get from the predictability of knowing that some one of us will encourage tree planting or house rehabbing or opening a new school as a way to better love the world; the hands that hold ours when we're dying; the spirits of those who ruminate in our memory so that our sense of loss is lessened. Even when we look up at the night sky, one among us reminds us of our common origin in star dust—and the destiny we share.

Just as the magi did, we give each other **courage**—the courage to let go of the prestige of helping the Herods of our time; the courage to be quietly moving through the dark desert night toward the little cave of hope; the courage to defect in place; the courage to speak a different truth; the courage to walk with a cane even if it shows one's aging; the courage to hold a critically ill child or spouse until the fear and pain subsides—to spite our own exhaustion and fear of death; the courage to say no to drug dealers by going into a village in Juarez Mexico because if one of us does not, disabled children will be increasingly isolated; the courage to see a tomorrow that is different than today.

Elizabeth Ann Seton knew well the delight and the struggle of following the star. Her spirit continues to lead us as the star once led the magi. While enduring the heartache of isolation following William's illness and death, the trials of raising five children in the religious climate of New York in the early 1800's, Elizabeth Seton found herself in a state of absolute exasperation. Turning to Scripture and her beloved collection of sermons, she reflected on the fidelity of God and the travels of the magi: "Alas, **where is my star?**" she pleaded. Year after year, this season of Christmas must have been particularly difficult for her. Her husband William died just a few days after Christmas in Italy, far from his New York home and separated from four of his five children by an

ocean. William's reflection on the birth of Christ indeed magnifies with considerable affection a spiritual underpinning that most certainly influenced Elizabeth's spirituality during those rough years of star gazing. As recorded in a letter from Elizabeth to Rebecca, she recalled that William repeatedly said about the significance of Christmas, "this day my Redeemer took pain and sorrow that I might have Peace; this day he gained eternal life for me." To say that Elizabeth took in stride the struggles of "going home by another way" is an understatement. For Elizabeth, the persistence of her spiritual curiosity coupled with her courage to pursue an earthly spiritual home in the Catholic Church made her a deeply compassionate woman. Elizabeth Seton was a woman who transformed even the pathetic little ship room where William lay dying into the hospitality and comfort of home. Being at home in her own skin seemed quite natural for this tiny, star-gazing woman.

We are Elizabeth's magi. She could not have known that we would become part of her caravan of companions when she bravely boarded a ship with her children and traveled to Baltimore. Broken and weathered by the trials of living within the hostilities and uncertainties of her day, she could not know that one day we would sit in this place in Cincinnati Ohio and commit ourselves to patiently waiting for and accepting in God's time the arrival of the star she pleaded with God to reveal in her own time. In the whispers, Elizabeth heard God's invitation to come to the table of companionship and grace. We travel with Elizabeth and one another as companions going home by whatever unusually blest route God leads us.

This year's three recipients of the Elizabeth Seton Award are the essence of listening to God's whispering guidance and faithfully creating home in the midst of wherever God's light has led them. Debbie, God's star has led you to the precious residents of St. Joseph Home. Like the magi, your life reminds us to be faithful to the gift of compassion. Sr. Peg, my friend and mentor, God's light has led you to the College of Mount St. Joseph. Like the magi, your life reminds us to be faithful to the gift of curiosity. Victor, God's light has led you to ministry among the people of Peru. Like the magi, your life of servant leadership reminds us to be faithful to the gift of courage. In the Eucharist, we become strong together because we bring into communion the right intentions of our hearts that transform the world. Like Elizabeth Seton, each of you is a gifted witness of this sacrament's transformational influence.

In a few minutes, our liturgy will continue with the setting of the table for Eucharist, a table set by the marvelous compassion of Elizabeth Seton and the life she continues to breathe into our Community of Charity. We might pause for a moment and ask: Why do I come seeking Christ this day? Do I come with a heart full of expectation on behalf of the nameless, faceless suffering? On their behalf, am I willing to go home by a different way? This shared journey we are on together makes our hearts more malleable, our minds more open, our senses more acutely able to see, hear and touch the Living, Loving, God. We rejoice that we too have been called to be star gazers, companions following God's illuminating light.