

Go Home A Different Way

January 10, 2016

There are three aspects of the Epiphany story that make this my very favorite celebration of the entire Christmas season. In fact, truth be told, it's probably my favorite celebration of the whole church year.

The first aspect is Gift. Not about receiving gifts, but about giving them. One of my colleagues has a refrain that she tells her church year after year at this time. She tells them that Christmas is about Jesus' birthday, not yours! She's rather blunt, but it gets the point across.

Another of my colleagues tells a great story about unused gifts. She tells the story of having gone to Six Flags Over Georgia with a middle school class trip. Six Flags Over Georgia is one of those great big amusement parks that all kids seem to absolutely love. (I don't know about you, but as I grow older, I love them less and less . . .)

But when Cameron went there as a 12-year-old, she absolutely adored it, and she brought with her some birthday money that she had received. She had saved it up because every time that she had gone to Six Flags Over Georgia before this she had walked past that shop at the very entrance of the park that has all of that glass tchotchke, the really elaborately blown animals and whatnot, and she had been forced to walk past because she didn't have her own spending money. But now she did.

So the very first thing she did when her class trip got to Six Flags Over Georgia was she bought the most elaborate, beautiful, fragile little glass horsey that she could possibly find. And, of course, this being the very beginning of the day, it meant that she couldn't go on a single ride the rest of the day because she had to hold on to her horsey. The chaperones were smart enough to make sure she learned this lesson.

She says that when she got the horsey home, it was still too precious to even take out of the box. And, over time, it didn't just sit on her dresser anymore. It ended up in the back of the closet.

She found it 30 years later at the back of the closet . . . crushed.

Whether it's not using the good stationery or the fine china, or not taking the time to make the drive to visit your dying aunt, or staying buttoned up instead of saying the heck with it and rolling around in the snow with the kids even though you know you've got a ton of work to do at home, we're all too familiar with putting the valuable out of reach, only to realize that we've wasted it. My friend learned an important lesson that day. Anytime you receive something precious, you have a decision to make: either the gift is so valuable that it can't be risked, or the gift is so valuable that it must be risked. What I learned from her story is that there is no tragedy like the tragedy of an unused gift.

And so one of the questions of Epiphany for all of us is what gifts should we be offering to the world and, really, even to ourselves today? This could be a new twist that you take on New Year's resolutions – not asking how it is that this year I'm going to fix myself, but rather asking how it is that this year I'm being called to share, how I'm called to be a gift.

For me, this aspect of the Epiphany story is one of the reasons that I chose Epiphany as my Ordination day: I have never felt more alive than when I preach or when I visit the sick, and not being able to share that gift was crushing me, like Cameron's little glass horse in the back of her closet. Part of why I chose Epiphany as my ordination day is because of being so saddened by having a gift, a precious, passionate gift, that as a Catholic woman I wasn't being allowed to give.

It's been a blessed, humbling experience to offer myself to God and to the people of God. The only thing that I would change about the actual ordination day is that, now that I am more comfortable with my community, I'd say that I really wish that I had gone with my initial instinct and had a jazz singer friend of mine sing the prelude. I had wanted her to sing "*All of Me*." You know that one, right?

*All of me. Why not take all of me?
Can't you see I'm no good without you.
You've got the best, so why not take the rest?*

You know it. I wanted to sing that and yet I was a little too hesitant.

My friend's story of her crushed glass horse puts you and me smack-dab in the middle of the Epiphany story when we realize that a gift that isn't given is no gift at all. To be sure, there's a risk in offering ourselves, but there's even more risk in not doing so.

The second aspect of the Epiphany story that, I think, really can resonate with us in the here and now is that idea of Homage. We are a very good people at listing all of the people and all of the things that we will not kneel down for. We won't kneel down for crowned heads. We won't bend for terrorists. We're clear on how we feel about kneeling to bishops. By and large, we are a straight-backed and lock-kneed people.

Here is the why the magi were like us: they refused to kneel at Herod's crowned head. But here's a way that we ought to try to be like them: they knew which things were not worth their homage, and which things should drive them straight to their knees, not in penance, but in reverence.

There's not much in the world that ought to be able to make you kneel. But this ought to: a deity with no place to lay his head, a savior who'd later kneel in front of you to wash your feet, a God who could have remained above it all, but stooped, bent to get as close to you as possible, and then paid a price for it.

So sometime today I would challenge you to do this: get down on your knees, open your arms, bow your head. Or, if you're feeling particularly and especially brave, try touching your forehead to the floor. If your body can't do these things, assume whatever posture it is that speaks to you of humility and reverence.

Hold that position for a while. Perhaps you could pray the words from that hymn that we sang on Christmas Eve, "*In the Bleak Midwinter*," when we sang:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise one, I would do my part.
Yet what I can I give him, give him my heart.*

Take some time to pay homage as you wrap up that prayer. Perhaps you might say something along the lines of: God, I wouldn't do this for anyone else but you.

The third panel, then, on our triptych – our three different facets of the Epiphany that I think can speak so much to us today – is Going Home A Different Way. The magi dreamt that they were to “go home a different way.” This is one of those rare instances where the English is actually the better translation even than the original Greek. On the surface, we hear that in their dream they were to take a detour, that they are to go back to their telescopes and their laboratories by going around Herod's palace, instead of going through it. But the double meaning here is intentional: they are to go home having been affected by their encounter with God-made-flesh. As I told the kids, these wise people had an epiphany. They were to go home seeing things a different way.

We can find ourselves in this panel of the story by asking ourselves how we are different because of Christmas, because of the incarnation, because of Compassion becoming flesh and dwelling among us. If this question is hard for you, I think spending more time in panels 1 and 2, a little more time paying homage and figuring out how to offer your gifts may help. Friends, I am confident that if we do, there is no way that we won't go home different. Alleluia, and Amen.

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Matthew 2:1-12, Numbers 10