

“Married to Amazement”
Matthew 2:1-12

A few years ago, there was a movie called *Nell* which had its central character played by Jody Foster be a woman by the name of Nell. After her mother dies, Nell grows up alone in the forest, where she knows nothing of the world’s modern ways and people: No electricity, plumbing, television, politics, fashion or sports. But the world beyond the forest finally found her. Then she is studied, observed and then taken out of the forest by well-meaning authorities who felt that she should be part of the rest of the world so that she can live a happy life. Her fate is finally decided by a jury of twelve people. There were lawyers on two different sides. But then Nell gives a very powerful speech at the end. She tells the jury in the primitive speech she learned as a young child these words: “You have big things, you know big things, but you don’t look into each other’s eyes. And you’re hungry for quietness. I’ve lived a small life. And I know small things. But the quiet forest is full of angels. In the daytime there comes beauty. In the nighttime, there comes happiness.” Even though this woman lived a simple life that seemed deprived of the basics of modern comfort and science, Nell’s character represented something deeper than many of us know in our modern life. She knew how to pay attention to the sacred in her surroundings. She lived with a full awareness of nature, of the world around her and of the sacredness of life. We are surrounded by so much noise and stuff that it is often hard for us to have that keen sense of awareness of the sacred in our lives. In fact, we are often so preoccupied that we even miss things and people that are in front of us. It is hard sometimes to be really amazed at anything. Only when we are on the margins of “normal” life are we able to be in touch with the sacred.

This is the message of our Gospel reading this morning from Matthew 2. The story of Epiphany, with the visit of the magi to Jesus, the child, is about learning to look for God’s presence and the mystery of life in the margins, the sidelines of human knowledge, power, wisdom and control. Our ability to be open to mystery is what guides us to the presence of God.

Oftentimes, the magi are referred to as the wise men from the East. This can be misleading because we tend to think of them as people with sound judgment. The word “magi” was used exclusively for astrologers, ones who studied the stars to discern the future. Thus, they had a knowledge of reality that ordinary people – whether elite or peasant – did not. Why is this important to the message of today? I think it is important because we tend to think that human wisdom was the key to finding the way to Jesus for these men. While in fact it was their ability to believe in the mysteries of the stars that led them to find Jesus. Their human wisdom led them to the palace of King Herod at first. And Herod, as expected, was very threatened by the magi’s search for a new king. Even though the magi followed the stars, their human wisdom led them to where they expected to find a king, but their openness to the mystery of God led them to the humble place of the birth of Jesus. What is also interesting about the magi is the fact that they sought to find the sign of the presence of God in a place outside of their country and outside of their religion. It would be like having us today follow the guidance of the Spirit to find God’s presence in a Muslim, Buddhist, or Jewish home or person. What would make people cross such boundaries? I believe that when we are truly following the lead of the Spirit, our human boundaries and human wisdom are usually turned upside down and often we end up finding Christ in the least expected places or experiences.

The Kingdom of God as presented by the Gospel of Matthew is coming through Jesus Christ and is set against the backdrop of the kingdom of Herod. These two kingdoms are such opposites. The one comes to us in the unconventional wisdom of powerlessness in a manger, through a baby, in the following of a star, in the devotion of people who are normally considered

outsiders to the faith. The kingdom of Herod on the other hand is here through manipulations, violence and the need for control. The Gospel of Matthew is careful to record in this story that the elite and powerful in the world are the ones who reject the work of God in Israel through Jesus, while it is the ones who believe in mystery and even the magic of life that end up paying homage to Christ.

The invitation is for us today to pay attention to the wonder and mystery of life and faith. The best of the world's wisdom and knowledge is not enough to help us embrace the mystery. In fact, it could be a hindrance in our way. The gift of God's presence and revelation is always before us, but we have to always be able to be in a state of amazement on the margins of power and "conventional" wisdom.

Mary Oliver has a powerful poem that speaks beautifully of this truth. It is called *When Death Comes*. Here is a little excerpt from it,

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

We are invited today through this feast of Epiphany to the same sense of amazement and wonder that the magi had about the stars, the universe, and the mysteries of God's love. Oftentimes I am surprised at how some Christians try to explain and prove everything about faith as if faith can be reduced to facts that we can understand and God can be limited to our definitions and calculations. The Jesuit priest, Anthony de Mello wrote, "On the question of his own Enlightenment the Master always remained reticent, even though the disciples tried every means to get him to talk. All the information they had on this subject was what the Master once said to his youngest son who wanted to know what his father felt when he became Enlightened. The answer was: "A fool." When the boy asked why, the Master had replied, "Well, son, it was like going to great pains to break into a house by climbing a ladder and smashing a window and then realizing later that the door of the house was open."

It often seems that we spend so much of our energy trying to figure out our faith, our relationships, our life as if these things can be only managed and controlled through logic or ordered thoughts. But the heart of the matter is that a great deal of what we need to do in life is trust that deeper sense of wonder that is within us. This sense of wonder is not something that is superstitious or trivial. It does not mean that our sense of wonder and amazement should contradict or be against the norms of science. Yet, wonder and amazement can lead us beyond the limits of science and human knowledge. Amazement is also not limited to people who are star gazers or have special powers. The magi followed the star to Bethlehem because they had a special ability in that area, but they also were willing to believe in mystery. Astrology was a science that depended on careful study of the stars and constellations. Yet, it was also a field that allowed for the mystery of life and the connection between the universe and the human life.

Where do you allow for mystery in your life? How much do you spend of your time in amazement and awe of God's presence in the world?

Once upon a time there was a gathering of the stars, a shining convergence of light. They came together to boast of their service to humanity and what they had done in obedience to God's command to shine forth and bring light in the heavens. They didn't gather very often, but when they did it was a sight to behold. They shimmered and shone, pulsed and throbbed with every color of white. One star spoke amid the music of their coming together. "I am the pole star," she sang out. "If it weren't for me, humans would be lost. They would have no sense of direction. Their journeys would be nightmares that never ended. Because of me they know where they are on the earth and so can go from one place to the next." Another star spoke and said, "Well, I don't have a name, but what I have done is really spectacular, for I am the star that darted behind the sun at just the right moment during an eclipse and forever changed the shape of earth's science." The others beamed and glowed in recognition. Others spoke up and cited their contributions to science, to art, to music, to the beauty of the earth's dome. Then, everyone heard a small cough and stopped for a moment. It was the Sun, who politely but firmly pointed out that he, too, was a star, probably the most potent and necessary for the service he rendered daily to the creatures and dwellers on the earth. The stars all deferred to the Sun's obvious power. Then someone noticed one star who hadn't said a thing. It was quiet and remote, and it looked like it was trying not to be noticed or seen. It was singled out and asked what it had done for humankind. It was silent a moment and then confessed honestly that it hadn't done a thing. In fact, it hadn't even been discovered; its existence was totally unknown. After a moment of silence, some of the stars exploded with laughter, commenting, "Of what use is a star if it isn't even known to exist?" After all they were told to be lights in the firmament and to shine forth to the glory of God and to encourage humankind. The star listened and pondered these things, wondering how to reply. Then it had a flash of insight. It smiled and spoke up saying, "Wait, maybe I have done something for human beings after all. It's true, as I said, that they don't know me. But they are not fools. They study the heavens and plot the trajectories of the planets and other clusters of stars, bits of dust, and black holes, and they know something is missing! So, my contribution is really very crucial, for I keep them awake! I remind them of mystery, of the unknown, and what has yet to be discovered. In fact, I think my being so hidden lures them further into the skies and to the awe and grandeur of God as maker and keeper of all things in the heavens and on the earth. I'm glad that you challenged me on my existence and presence in the heavens, for now I know that I want to stay hidden for a long time. I want them to know they have much yet to discover and that there is so much mystery out there. Perhaps they will remember that the heavens reflect much below and that the mystery within them is just as deep and far flung among themselves." The stars were silent as they listened. All returned to their places in the sky, humbler and more in awe of God's hidden plans and secrets. For now even they wondered what they didn't yet know about themselves and about the Creator who is light itself.

May we be married to amazement so that the experience of Epiphany may be our way of life today and in the days to come! Amen.