

An old woman walked up and tied her old mule to the hitching post. As she stood there, brushing the dust from her face and clothes, a young gunslinger stepped out of the saloon with a gun in one hand and a bottle of whiskey in the other. The young gunslinger looked at the old woman and laughed, "Hey, old lady – have you ever danced?" The old woman looked up at the gunslinger and said, "No...., I never did dance.... Never really wanted to."

A crowd had gathered as the gunslinger grinned, and said, "Well, you're gonna dance now," and he started shooting at the old woman's feet. The old woman prospector – not wanting to get her toes blown off – started hopping around. Everybody was laughing. When his last bullet had been fired, the young gunslinger, still laughing, holstered his gun and turned around to go back into the saloon.

The old woman turned to her pack mule, pulled out a double-barreled shotgun, and cocked both hammers. The loud clicks carried clearly through the desert air. And the crowd stopped laughing immediately. The young gunslinger heard the sounds, too, and he turned around very slowly. The silence was almost deafening. The crowd watched as the young gunman stared at the old woman and the large gaping holes of those twin barrels.

The barrels of the shotgun never wavered in the old woman's hands, as she quietly said, "Son, have you ever kissed a donkey's behind?" The gunslinger swallowed hard and said, "No M'am....but I've always wanted to." There are 5 new-years lessons here for all of us: 1. Never be arrogant. 2. Don't waste your ammunition. 3. Alcohol makes you think you're smarter than you are. 4. Always make sure you know who has the power. 5. Don't mess with old people; we didn't get old by being stupid!

OK, we need to step back from this story of the Epiphany and see the bigger picture. As your AT HOME WITH THE WORD books beautifully and clearly point out, "Epiphany is one of the oldest feasts of the Christian calendar, and, as its name suggests, it is a celebration of the manifestation of Christ to the world. The Greek *epiphaneia* means 'manifestation,' especially as it relates to the manifestation of a deity..." (p. 33)

Any historical sketch of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus would have to include accounts of His rejection by some -- and His acceptance by others. In general, He was rejected by the religious and political elite of Jerusalem and accepted by many ordinary Jews. But the most startling development was His acceptance by Gentiles -- foreigners. Although this happened in a minor way during His lifetime, it happened in a major way when the Christian mission moved out of Palestine into the greater Mediterranean world. This unexpected welcome of the Good News by Gentiles was seen as a theological reality – a GOD-reality. The coming of the Gentiles to Jesus was not arbitrary or serendipitous. It was destined. It could not be explained in any other way except that the hand of God was at work. The early Christian writers, including the evangelists, the writers of the gospels, expressed this conviction in the literary forms and theological categories of their culture.

One of the literary forms and theological categories was origin mythology. Origin mythology believes that the events surrounding the birth of a child foretold his future destiny. When this happened, it was a signal that God, who holds past, present, and future together, was at work. This is what happens in this story for the feast of the Epiphany: the future rejection and acceptance of Jesus is foreshadowed by the rejection and acceptance at His birth.

Also, it was assumed that God lived in heaven but wanted His kingdom to extend to the affairs of the earth. As we pray in the Lord's Prayer "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN...."

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(Mt 6:10). So when heaven and earth come together, it is a sign that God's will is active. This is what happens in this story: heaven in the form of a star and earth in the form of a child align with one another. Therefore, God, who rules over time and space, is known when the time becomes unified and space becomes connected. To those who can grasp its theological intent, this imaginative theological story leaves no doubt: God is the ultimate author of the life of Jesus.

The rejection of the child Messiah reveals the power of evil. When the Wise Men tell Herod, the current king of the Jews, of the heavenly indications of a newborn king of the Jews, the immediate reaction is fright. The advent of the long-awaited Messiah does not lead to celebration but to fear. The reason for this fear is not spelled out, but it can be surmised from the larger story. Herod and the chief priests know the grown child will be a threat to their position and power. They have corrupted the faith they were pledged to uphold; when the true faith arrives, their corruption will be exposed. The birth of a newborn king means only one thing to the Jerusalem crowd: rebuke and replacement.

When Herod consults the Scriptures, he finds the answer to the question of the Wise Men, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" The prophecy is clear: He will be born in Bethlehem of Judah. Herod will give them this information, but it will not be to help their quest. It will be so they might become the 'eyes and ears of the throne.' He has murder on his mind, but he needs more information to make it happen. He uses the Wise Men. Herod knows where the Messiah will be born, but he does not know when. So he arranges a secret meeting with the Wise Men. Secrecy is always the companion of hypocrisy and evil-doing. He appears inquisitive and wheedles from them the exact time of the star's rising. This gives him the relative date of the child's birth. He now has the place and the time of the Messiah's birth, enough information to send forth his soldiers to commit what Christian history remembers as the slaughter of the innocents.

But his plot is foiled by God, who will send an angel to Joseph, telling him in a dream to take the child and his mother into Egypt. Jesus will not be among the slaughtered innocents, although He will join them later. Also, the Wise Men will be warned in a dream to take another way home, a route that does not pass through Jerusalem. Herod is doing his best, but he is no match for God.

In contrast to Herod's evil rejection of the Child, the Wise Men rejoice. When the star stops above the place of the child, heaven and earth are conjoined, symmetrical, balanced. The Wise Men are not simply happy. They are overwhelmed with joy. They have found the one whom they sought, the fulfillment of human longing. They give gifts that show they have proper knowledge of who the child really is. The gold symbolizes a king, frankincense acknowledges a divinity, and myrrh – an ointment used in embalming – foreshadows Jesus' redemptive death. What Herod rejected and tried to murder, the Wise Men accept and worship. (adapted from John Shea, FOLLOWING LOVE INTO MYSTERY, p. 57-59)

Second, ok, so what? What could this story possibly have to do with us? Well, we see in this story how differently we can react to the announcement of the birth of a Messiah. Wise men follow the story, find the new king, and upon seeing Him, place their gifts at His feet. What happens to them afterwards? We have all kinds of apocryphal stories and legends about what happened to them afterwards and that is exactly the point. Their slipping away into anonymity is a crucial part of their gift. The idea is that they now disappear because they can now disappear. They have placed their gifts at the feet of the young king and can now leave everything safely in His hands. His star has eclipsed theirs. Far from fighting for their former place, they now happily cede it to Him. Like old Simeon, they can happily exit the stage singing: 'Now, Lord, you can dismiss your servants in peace! We can die! We know that we're in safe hands!'

And Herod, how much to the contrary! The news that a new king has been born threatens him at his core since he is himself a king. The glory and light that will now shine upon the new king will no longer shine on him. So what is his reaction? Far from laying his resources at the feet of the new king, he sets out to kill him. Moreover, to ensure that his murderers find him, he kills all the male babies in the entire area. An entire book on anthropology might be written about this last line. Fish are not the only species that eats its young! But the real point is the contrast between the wise men and Herod: the wise men see new life as promise – and they bless it – Herod sees new life as a threat – and he curses it.

This is a rich story with a powerful spiritual challenge: What is OUR reaction to new life – especially to life that threatens me, that will take away some of my own popularity, sunshine and adulation? Can I, like the wise men, lay my gifts at the feet of the young and move towards anonymity and old age – eventual death – content that the world is in good hands, even though those hands are not my hands? Or, like Herod, will I feel that life as a threat and try somehow to kill it, lest its star somehow diminish my own?

To bless another person is to give away some of our own life so that the other might be more enriched for his or her journey. Good parents do that for their children. Good teachers do that for their students; good mentors do that for their proteges, good pastors do that for their parishioners, good politicians do that for their countries, and good elders do that for the young. They give away some of their own lives to resource the other. The wise men did that for Jesus.

How do we react when a young star's rising begins to eclipse our own light? Wise men – and women – enrich and bless that light, and gracefully exit the stage. May it be so for you and for me – and for future generations, for the life of our world. Amen. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 12/30/17)