

Epiphany Gifts Leading Us Into the New Year

Happy New Year! Immediately before our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah is a blessing prophecy to help set us right before the Lord this New Year 2011: "***For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.***" Jeremiah 29:11

Our Lord has plans for each and every one of his faithful people. Our Lord speaks to us through the ages from the 7th century Jeremiah, the 1st century writer of Ephesians, and the recorder of St. Matthew's Gospel who brings us the only description of the Epiphany story. OUR 2011 story, with an active God who is as much with us as he was with the wisemen that approached that humble manger bed, is just beginning. If we look carefully at our readings this morning, we can enter our new year knowing we are the recipients of the true gifts of the Epiphany.

To have an "epiphany" is to have our eyes and our minds opened to something new. Something we might have seen before, but we see it in a new way. We have heard the story of the wisemen and the "Epiphany" year after year. But today's readings, taken together, can help us understand the gifts of Epiphany.

As our noted author and special speaker this week, Brent Landau, pointed out in his introduction of the traditional Epiphany story, the number of the wise men was not mentioned in Holy Scripture -- though we entered singing about those 3 kings from the orient. There could have been 3 of them -- corresponding with the worldly gifts given our Lord -- Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh -- or it could have been 30, or 3,000.

Our New Testament reading is from the book of Ephesians. As renowned biblical commentator John R. W. Stott encompasses the purpose of this epistle in one sentence: "The letter focuses on what God did through the historical work of Jesus Christ and does through his Spirit today, in order to build his new society in the midst of the old."* So if we look to our letter as a guide to how the life of Jesus continues to influence our life in 2011, I contend that the writer of Ephesians outlines the gifts given to us at our Epiphany of Jesus as our Lord, the Son of God, at 5. From the epistle:

"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a

- 1) **spirit of wisdom & revelation** as you come to know him, so that,
- 2) **with the eyes of your heart enlightened**, you may know what is:
- 3) **the hope to which he has called you**, what are (psalm 84)
- 4) **the riches of his glorious inheritance** among the saints, and
- 5) **what is the immeasurable greatness of his power** for us who believe.

Anyone can look upon the manger scene. But it takes a faithful person, whose spirit has been born and touched by the Lord, to have a **spirit of wisdom and revelation** to see what's really going on. The wise men from the East, how many of them there were, represent this spirit that we are to have and use. God gives us discerning minds to be able distinguish between what we see on the surface and to see His hand in it. His plans for his people are revealed through history. The history of the chosen people -- as described by our prophet Jeremiah this morning --

God's people will be gathered from all around the world and they will be shepherded into God's kingdom.

"See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."

This babe that was visited by shepherds will shepherd each and every one of us through this life and into the next. His life, that God had plans for since before he was born as well, will be ransomed for all of us on the cross. And those of us that know of this living God that came to earth, we can be given wisdom like the wisemen and God's will for our lives will be revealed as we walk faithfully with Him through this life into the next.

Ephesians' describes the 2nd gift: **with the eyes of your heart enlightened.** Now as we walk, we must keep our eyes open. Not just the eyes that give us images illuminated by the sun and the moon and the stars -- all that He gave us to begin with -- but with the eyes of our hearts. The Christmas carol that begins with an Epiphany verse: "Do you see what I see?" Can those with faith look at the same scene as those without, and we see something completely different?

"Said the night wind to the little lamb
Do you see what I see?
Way up in the sky little lamb
Do you see what I see?
A star, a star
Dancing in the night, with a tail as big as a kite"

For we cannot just look with our eyes, but led by the spirit, we see with our heart. As we walk toward the light, our hearts must be open and willing to see. And the meaning and the mystery and the message from God will be revealed.

We sang it ourselves in the sequence hymn, just a few minutes ago. We are seeking, asking: "What child is this?" And the chorus answers: This is Christ the KING!" We are to proclaim it and help others see how God has come into the world. An interesting point of our sequence hymn is that our hymnal only includes 3 of the 5 original verses of this Christmas hymn. The verses left out reinforce this idea that our journey with Christ can begin at Epiphany, but does not end there. The missing verses from the original:

Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

Raise, raise a song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

After our recognition of Christ as the one -- thanks to the spirit of wisdom and the eyes of the heart -- we are to bring him our gifts as we are to journey with him to the cross and live with him forever. The frankincense, gold and myrrh are represented in our reading in Ephesians by hope, riches and power.

3) the hope to which he has called you, what are **4) the riches of his glorious inheritance** among the saints, and **5) what is the immeasurable greatness of his power** for us who believe.

For our lives are lived in hope. Hope that we are fulfilling the will of our creator as we are his hands and feet on this earth where he once walked, but now relies on us, his faithful servants. We KNOW that we will be with Him always, but our hope for a world filled with peace, love, justice and righteousness never fades away. We live by the spirit and see with our heart, and therefore we live by the hope to which he has called you. Frankincense, a mighty incense, is a holy smoke that allows us to breathe in new, refreshed air that gives us hope of a new, refreshed life. It was a gift to the King by wise, learned scholars who waited for ages, generations of scholars, that hoped they would be the one's to see God's son on earth. If we believe, we can breathe in the scent of a powerful incense called the Holiest of spirits, who transcends this world and gives us hope everlasting.

Our lives are richly blessed, perhaps not with expensive gold and riches of this life, but with the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints. We are people who know where we are going and to whom we belong. Like the gold of the wise men, we are given the riches of God's grace.

With God's grace, we are witnesses to his great power. A power that heals the faithful and brings them from across the earth into his Kingdom. A power that is immeasurable and represented by the powerful spice myrrh. A spice that never fades but enlightens all it touches.

Using a translation of our reading of Ephesians from The Message, a translation by Regent College Professor Eugene Petersen who aimed, in his words, "...to write straight from the original Hebrew and Greek texts..I began to attempt to bring into English the rhythms and idioms of the original language....My primary goal was to capture the tone of the text and the original conversational feel of the Greek, in contemporary English."

Beginning with verse 11 & ending at 19:

"It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone. It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get

everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life. That's why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the followers of Jesus, I couldn't stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!”

Now I contend that all of us whether exhausted from the holiday season or renewed by rest over the holidays would like to enter our new year with “endless energy, boundless strength.” Today we are called to enter the new year armed with the gifts of the spirit of wisdom and revelation, the eyes of our hearts enlightened, with renewed hope, riches of his grace, and knowledge of his life-giving and saving power. We enter 2011 knowing a God to whom we can find in a manger bed, walking with us from Bethlehem through the journeys of our lives, and who will be waiting for us with open arms -- arms opened to us from the manger bed accepting the gifts of the wise men, arms opened up to the world from the cross -- giving us the gift of His love and life, embracing us in the end as we are called to embrace the infant Lord this Epiphany and New Year 2011.

In Jesus Name, we pray,

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