

Epiphany 2017
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So we've come to the wonderful story of the three kings who came a long way to see the newborn baby Jesus. They followed a star, which led them to the manger, where they found the baby with his parents. But as Jesuit Michael Simone points out, no one really knows if the story is historically accurate.

However Matthew's narrative has inspired Christian imagination from earliest days. There are lavish Byzantine frescoes in Jerusalem and Ravenna that depict the magi as high-ranking Persian dignitaries. Western Christians during the Middle Ages, inspired by Psalm 72, depicted them as kings, complete with crowns and warhorses. Separate traditions among Eastern and Western Christians claim that the magi later became Christians and died martyrs' deaths.

Author Frederick Buechner also suggests that the gifts probably cost the magi plenty but seem hardly appropriate to the occasion. Maybe they were all they could think of for a child who had everything. Regardless, they set the gifts down on the straw – the gold, frankincense, the myrrh – worshipped briefly, and then returned home. Buechner then wonders that the magi may have overlooked the one gift the child would have been genuinely pleased to have someday, and that was the gift of themselves and their love.

There are two different stories about a possible 4th wise man. The first is about Artaban and since I related the entire story last year, I will only remind you he had three jewels to give to Jesus but used all three to help people in need. During the earthquake that shook the ground at the time of Christ's death, Artaban was struck by a rooftop tile. As he lay dying, bystanders thought they heard him say, as if in a dream, "But, Lord, when did I see you hungry or thirsty or naked?" Then a beautiful smile came across his face and he died in peace.

The other story is told in the forests of Provence in southern France and is about L'Enchante. In this story, the magi are shepherds and the first three bring eggs, bread and cheese, and wine. As a side note, these three seem to be better focused on the practical rather than the extravagant. As the three chatted with Mary and Joseph, they wondered what had happened to L'Enchante.

They looked high and low and then one of them looked behind the blanket hung to keep the draft off the little child. There they found L'Enchante kneeling at the crib. He had taken the path Buechner suggested would have been the best and given of himself, given his love. Throughout the night, L'Enchante knelt and whispered, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu."

Today's feast is, of course, about the manifestation of Jesus to the whole world; it's about Jesus bringing light into the darkness created by our sinfulness. Which brings me to an Hasidic tale about a rabbi quizzing his students. He asked, "How can we determine the hour of dawn, when night ends and the day begins?" One of the students suggested, "Day begins when, from a distance, you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep." "No", answered the rabbi. Another student asked, "Is it when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?"

Again the answer was, "No." "Please tell us the answer then", said the students. "It is," said the rabbi, "when you can look into the face of other human beings and you have enough light *in you* to recognize them as your brothers and sisters. Up until then, it is night and darkness is still with us."

Patricia Sanchez suggests that while we remember with gladness the One whose birth made light live and move among us, we also have to admit that the darkness of which the rabbi spoke continues to overshadow many of us and our communities.

Let's face it, as long as there are divisions, as long as there is bias, prejudice and ethnic hatred, we continue to find ourselves in a darkness that longs for the dawn. We don't have to travel to faraway places on camels to find the light of Christ – we need only look at our neighbors.