

### **Lessons from the Magi**

Aurelie Tousainte was a 50-year-old Acadian woman who had avoided marrying her entire life. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in her culture, this was highly unusual, but she had benefited by keeping a fine estate with servants, and social activities in the community for company. She didn't regret her decision to remain single.

One day her neighbor Odile Lamarche arrived with her four children. Her eyes were red with tears as she told the story of her mother's serious illness that required her to go by train to the nearest city where the woman lived and needed care. Could Aurelie care for her family in her absence? At first hesitant that she wouldn't know what to do, Aurelie accepted the challenge as the children waved good-bye to their mother riding off in a farm cart.

It took a few days for Aurelie to get accustomed to the presence of so many little people wanting to explore their new world: Albert's passion to study everything, including her prize gardenias which he picked in the flower garden; Cecile's eager desire to help the servants with cooking and laundry; Marcel's joy in chasing the chickens around the yard; Lodie's intent to eat everything in sight. Not surprising, Aurelie was exhausted by the end of the day after giving the children their bath and dressing them in little nightshirts.

When the two weeks were over and Odile appeared on the road, the children scampered into their mother's cart for the trip home. Aurelie was left on the porch of her house when suddenly she felt tears welling up in her eyes. They came in such a flood that she had to sit down and ask herself why. But she already knew the answer – regret over what she'd missed all her life. It was a moment of epiphany that she thought about again and again in the days ahead.

Today is Epiphany Sunday, the day closest to January 6. The part of the Christmas story that wasn't dealt with on Christmas Eve is the visit of the Magi to the child Jesus. Their epiphany (the word means "an illuminating discovery, usually of an unexpected nature") was every bit as important in their lives as the one Aurelie experienced as she found joy in being around and working with children.

"Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and we have come to worship him.'" (Matthew 2:1-2) The Greek word *magoi* or magi referred to royal astrologers in the Persian court, learned men who spent their lives studying the heavens. As they were working one day, they suddenly discovered an unusual phenomenon prompting them to take action, setting out on a perilous journey to distant Judea to visit what the celestial appearance indicated – a great king had been born, a child of God. The 'star' must have been some sort of supernatural occurrence, as it would later guide them to the very house where Jesus was living in Bethlehem – no normal star millions of miles from earth could do that.

Lesson 1: Just like the Magi, we need to be ready to meet God in the midst of our everyday activities, then get up and follow where the lead is pointing. God doesn't only appear to us in certain locations or at certain times, but any day, at any time. We have to be awake and alert.

The Jewish captivity to Babylon from 597-581 BC familiarized these Gentile people with the knowledge of Hebrew scripture. Possibly the Magi's recognition of the importance of what they saw was due to their understanding that a divine king, a messiah, would come to the earth. The sign of the star they saw was simply affirming their belief in the truth of what they found

written in the scrolls of the Jews. How different their reaction than that of Herod, who plotted murder as soon as heard of a possible rival to the throne coming into his kingdom.

Lesson 2: What we believe should determine how we behave. Be willing to put feet on our faith, then get going and follow its lead. We should be ready to take hold of new opportunities that God presents us with, and step out in faith, knowing as the Magi that something special awaits us at the end of our journey.

“[King Herod] called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, ‘Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?’ ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they said, ‘for this is what the prophet wrote.’” (Matthew 2:4,5) Even murderous King Herod went to the source of knowledge – holy scripture - to find the answer to his question. How much more should we be willing to do the same when confronted with an issue that God can shed light on?

Lesson 3: Scripture is a wonderful resource if we want to know God’s direction for our lives; get good directions, then follow its lead. Don’t get discouraged if a wrong turn is made, like the Magi’s going to Jerusalem thinking the new king would be in the capital city. Once they knew the right path, they wasted no time in going there. “After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.” (Matthew 2:9)

“They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:11) The fact that three different gifts were presented to Jesus doesn’t mean there were only three magi – there could have been many more. No one ever approached a ruler without a gift, so these men didn’t leave home without bringing items of

value with them, despite the danger of travel carrying such things. But how unusual to give a small child gold, frankincense and myrrh, the latter two aromatic resins.

Lesson 4: Don't worry about what gifts we bring; each is appropriate in its own way. Notice that the Magi didn't bring their gifts to secure an audience with Jesus. They didn't pay Mary a bribe to see her son, rather out of adoration, gratitude and awe they gave the best they had in homage to the new king. We can take a hint from them for our own lives.

We give Christ our gold when we realize our lives aren't made rich outside of him. When we pursue worldly riches like more money, bigger homes, the latest smartphone, the coolest vehicle, the most fashionable clothes – how can these passing physical things make our spirits rich with God's truth and love?

We give Christ frankincense when we offer our prayers in good times and bad, in season and out of season. Just like the priest ground the resin of frankincense fine and burned it on the altar, its aroma ascending to God, our requests and thanksgiving please God who seeks to have continual fellowship with us. Even if the embers meant to ignite our incense have grown cold and dark, let's reignite them through simplicity and silence, a willingness to listen, and a readiness to wait.

We give Christ myrrh when we join him in his sufferings for the life of the world, not hopeless or meaningless pain, but what brings new life. We seem to forget that Jesus conquered suffering and pain, death and the tomb. Even if we're presently in a situation that this is our reality, or going through something similar with another person or family, our stay in this place is only for a time. Christ's resurrection contains the promise of our own and those reaching out for the light of God to return.

Shirley gazed at the frail body of her daughter Sharon, now in the final stages of her struggle with emphysema. Despite the excellent care the young woman received from home, it wouldn't be long before the disease would take its final toll. However, that didn't stop Sharon from creating a Facebook account for others struggling with the illness, or simply coping with addictions. Every day she posted messages of hope and encouragement, personalized to those who responded.

Sharon was asleep when the package arrived. It wasn't a big box, so Shirley didn't want to awaken her from a sound sleep. Still, she was curious who could have sent something from such a distant place – clear across the country! But social media being what it is, it could have been from any place in the world. Shirley climbed the stairs to Sharon's room, package in hand. It was time for her medication, and maybe a peek inside the box!

Sharon grinned, "Go ahead and open it, Mom. I know you can't wait to see what's inside!" Sharon recognized the name on the gift card as one of the regular visitors to her Facebook page. Tears came to her eyes as she read the message inside. "Dear Sharon, at a time when you need lots of care yourself, you've become the caregiver to all of us who visit your page. You're a bright light to me as I struggle with my own illness. I feel stronger because of your prayers and your cheerful words. I know you rarely get out, so I hope this will bring the outside world closer to you." Sharon parted the tissue paper and gasped, "A telescope!"

It was a moment of epiphany, the realization that the light she brought to others was greater than the pain she faced daily. Now she could look at the stars just like the Magi who followed their dream of meeting Jesus, Messiah and King, the Son of God. May we pursue the true riches God wants us to share - the gifts we offer in Jesus' name, bringing moments of grace and illumination to others. Amen.