

I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Amen. (Louisa May Alcott)

There are three choices for today's 2nd Christmas, Year B, Gospel: Matthew's account of the Flight to Egypt, Luke's account of Jesus turning up in the Temple where his frantic parents went to look for him, and the Matthew account of the Magi and the Star. The decision about which to choose for me had most to do with today's date. Tomorrow night/ or Tuesday is the Epiphany and next Sunday is already John the Baptist and what was made manifest to whom in that story. The choice of the Jesus at the Temple narrative makes to me more sense, either in the Luke year or when there's a little more time before the 5/6th Epiphany. Without weekday services, major feasts have to be omitted, and it's just hard to go from "In the beginning was the Word" to John the Baptist's understanding who Jesus is as a manifestation of God's presence in the world, without some Epiphany transition. That leaves Herod, the Magi, the Star, and the homage paid to the baby by the Magi, and their gifts, and what those around the baby made of that. Somehow it's worth participating in the Christmas tableau a little longer, and considering that family and ways people gather to see, know, and to praise the infant and his family. How do we observe and greet him? We are willing and able to glimpse the baby, newborn and guarded, but it's hard to stare at the baby and take in his meaning and reality, and what we are to make of him and his visitors and their reactions.

Anne McConney says this in her meditations called *Our December Hearts*, "The twelve days of Christmas are over (almost). Our revels now are ended. For most of us, they ended some days ago and we are deep in the workaday world again..."

"As in poet W. H. Auden's phrase, 'we have tried unsuccessfully to love all our relatives.' And then McConney continues, "We are ready and more for a taste of the humdrum. We have two more months of winter to deal with and we need to get on with it.

"Today the wise men have arrived. Good for you, guys. Glad you could make it. Better late than never.

"Meanwhile we have an odd little season that can't make up its mind whether it's white or green ... Yet this strange little catch-all season is one of the most important in the church year and deserves much more attention than is usually given to it. It is the last Christmas present, saved until now, and today is the day we begin to unwrap it ... and examine with care exactly what we have been given.

"This gift of incarnation is no simple gift to be placed on a shelf and admired. It is complex, intricate, and mysterious. Like a turning prism, it blasts pure light into as many colors as the eye can see and undoubtedly some that it cannot. Like a finely tooled machine, it demands not only our examination, but also our participation in its purpose. And, in the final analysis, we discover that it has not been given to us to keep but to give away in great prodigal handfuls.

"The wise men brought gold and frankincense and myrrh, the traditional and symbolic gifts of kingship, godhood, and death. None of them, of course, was of any use or interest to a child, but humans like God, can only give what they have and, ultimately, all any of us have is ourselves. The wise men brought the gifts that were themselves and received the gift that as God's self, which is the same gift, rushing forth in endless abundance that we all receive. "Were they, too, surprised by this gift of infinite complexity? Did they turn it and touch it and wonder at its meaning? Were they, like us, astounded to discover that by these gifts—given and received—they had been drawn into nothing less than the showing forth of the

Christ? Did they protest that they had been caught unguarded and unready, or that this gift in the shape of a child was too great for them? Did they, protesting their unworthiness, try to give it back?

“But God does not take back a gift once given. We can refuse it, perhaps we can even smash it to bits, but we cannot return it. Nor are we ever worthy of, for that matter, ready, The gifts of God come gently in the night or blazing like Moses’ bush at high noon, but they are never given as rewards or bestowed as prizes; they are as unconditional as the Godhead itself.

“That is why this peculiar little season is so important. In this season we examine the gift—not simply the gentle image of the baby in the manger, the kindly animals, the kneeling shepherds, and at last, ...the wise men ...but the gift in its entire meaning shown forth to the world.

In this season, we explore the meaning of incarnation in our own lives, we study this thing that has happened, this physical joining of God with the created universe, this ‘taking of the manhood into God’ and if Christ’s manhood then all of humankind, drawn into God and linked to the Godhead forever. This thing willed in eternity is now shown forth in the only way we can comprehend it—in flesh and in time.” So writes Anne McConney.

It is the wonder at the reality of the small child being God in the flesh, and in our own beings. The wonder is this feast of the Incarnation, the amazing event of the baby is the most adult feast possible. It takes our own self-acceptance, some suspension of our hyper-rational ways of understanding, our giving over our feeling that we know what’s real and what’s possible. Yet the baby is the God of Gods, Lord of Lords, very God of Very Gods, now human.

The shepherds raced down the hill at the news. They saw the baby and accepted the strange new reality. The Magi, the educated, took time to get there. As soon as they “saw” they “came,” regretting that it had taken them time to see, to get it. We somehow need to be persuaded over and over and over before we are willing to head towards the living God, to worship the Christ. It is hard for us to travel. We can’t travel unless the weather and way and all are fair. If not, then there will be little risk, attempt to go to the incarnated Christ, we’ll just wait and see what happens. Indeed. Our religion is often just a seeing, a contemplation, rather than a motion or a stirring to do anything. It takes us time, leisure, risk, to allow ourselves, or to even head towards the idea that is bigger than our imaginations and knowledge combined. It takes our faith, and it is far easier rather than to understand this mystery or to live with the mystery, rather than to get to the end of this Advent/Christmas Season and wait then patiently for Advent/Christmas to come again. Can we sprint towards the reality of the baby like the shepherds? Can we move along purposefully and rationally to live ourselves into the being of God with us, and God’s being along side us, in all our days and time, in our living and person?

It seems to me that neither the shepherds nor the Magi are as helpful as is Mary. After the resurrection, we count on Thomas’s human examination of the wounds. Trusting Mary’s human witness of the incarnation, her presence and seeing, trusting, getting to know the realities of her baby, God incarnate, may well be useful to us comparably. We can also practice knowing the living God in each other and maybe in ourselves. When other people do extraordinary things, we often can sense God in them, although it’s hard to recognize and trust God in ourselves, our own actions. We don’t have to. If we live as though God could be with us, we can let other people see how we live, and let them see slivers of the incarnation in us, however unlikely that feels, and we can engage in the “Work of Christmas” in Howard Thurman’s poem:

“When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins.
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner,
To teach the nations,

To bring Christ to all,
To make music in the heart.”

The star comes and moves on, but inside and outside it will always lead us into and with
God now incarnate in us and with us: Good news.

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