

Sacredness, Light and Original Blessing

Matthew 2:1-3, 7-12

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After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory - this was during Herod's kingship - a band of scholars and astrologers arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, "Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him." When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified - and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well....

Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared.

Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, "Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship." Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place!

They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

Matthew 2:1-3, 7-12, The Message

Today is Epiphany Sunday on the church calendar. Epiphany as a historical Christian holiday actually falls on January 6, 12 days after Christmas. But since we don't gather for worship on Thursday, here we are. Epiphany focuses on this story from Matthew 2.

The story of Epiphany unfolds in a simple home on a simple street in Bethlehem, where an ordinary-seeming family opens their door to astonishing strangers from afar, who unexpectedly kneel before a mother with a toddler on her lap. Then they give strange gifts and tell strange stories in a strange language, with charades and hand gestures, of a long journey (probably 2 years), a journey led by a mysterious star, the very heavens pointing them to this precise place. This journey and this light revealed to them that the God of the cosmos has come into this life with us, for us all, and is indeed embodied in this drooling toddler sitting before them. (1)

And the mother and father, who – along with a few local shepherders – have carried this secret knowledge for a couple of years by themselves, are suddenly reminded of the scope of things by those from afar whose presence in their living room declares in no uncertain terms that the whole universe is in on this thing, that in their beloved child God is actually here,

one of love who will bring hope to those with little worldly power and will turn the world upside down. The story goes that these wise ones saw something in the heavens - a light, a star, planets, a comet. And that light led them to a child. And then it is revealed that this child was a light to all people, not only the Jews, but to the whole world, to foreigners like them. This is not a tribal story, not insiders and outsiders but a cosmic story of connections.

Epiphany is rooted in this cosmic story of light and crossing boundaries and deep wisdom of recognizing truth in new ways. John Philip Newell invites us to see that Celtic Spirituality in both its pre-Christian and Christian forms is a cosmic theology. And it begins with light. In the introduction, he writes about this thread of seeing Divine Light in all people:

I began my presentation in Ottawa by using a phrase from the prologue to John's Gospel, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (1:9). I spoke of the way the Celtic tradition invites us to look for this light in one another and in everything that has being. Attending the talk that evening was a young Mohawk Elder who had been invited to be there specifically to make observations at the end of my talk about the resonances between Celtic and Native wisdom. The Mohawk Elder stood with tears in his eyes as he spoke, "... I have been wondering where we would be as a Western world tonight, if the mission that had come to us from Europe centuries ago had come expecting to find light in us." (2)

Such a profound and wrenching query. Divine light in and for all people. Newell points us to one of the first teachers in Celtic Britain who asserted this. God's light in all people and for all people was recognized by Pelagius, a monk in Wales who was living and writing in the 4th century. He wrote about the sacredness of each person and the light even in a newborn's eyes. Each person has this divine love and light in them. All people are blessed by God. We would say - original blessing. The most typical mark of the spirituality of the Celtic tradition apparent in Pelagius' writings is his strong sense of the goodness of creation, in which the life of God can be glimpsed. "Everywhere," he says, 'narrow shafts of divine light pierce the veil that separates heaven from earth."

Pelagius was writing at the same time as Augustine whose theology was very different. Through his reading of scripture, experience and limited vision, Augustine proclaimed that humanity was full of sin from the moment of birth. And it was through the church, priests, that people could be saved from their sin and damnation. By this point in history, Christianity in many ways had been co-opted by the secular powers. The church was wedded to empire way of thinking. Some people are better, holier, more powerful than others. Us and them, clean and unclean, a duality of thinking.

I do not know my church history in depth to give a rationale for Augustine. What Newell suggests is that this conflict is an early example of how a Celtic Christian way of seeing was ignored and even banished from the church. Empire way of thinking could not tolerate this light in and for all people.

One way to see the story of Epiphany is that it is a story of empire thinking vs. Celtic wisdom.

Herod, empire incarnate, so-called king, is notably insecure and obsessed with his reputation, locked away in his fortress, raging in fear, causing all in the land to be terrified and worried about what he might do, because he's fixated on this perceived threat to his power and authority. There is a baby, he's told by these foreigners, who has been born specifically to claim what has been his title, "The King of the Jews." So he uses manipulation and flattery to try to coerce these scholars from another land to do his bidding - as though they are under his jurisdiction or influence – so that he can stamp out a potential usurper by any means necessary. The horror of his actions are described in verse 16. *Herod, when he realized that the scholars had tricked him, flew into a rage. He commanded the murder of every little boy two years old and under who lived in Bethlehem and its surrounding hills.*

Oh, Herod. Poor, frightened, tormented Herod. This story is so much bigger than you. It's so much longer, deeper, stronger and more significant. God is doing this thing. God has come, Divine love is here among us. Your power is not the ultimate power.

This reality – of a whole world and creation indivisibly connected to God and each other, of all nature in harmony, and all people in family, with God as the true sovereign, who rules in disconcerting vulnerability and incontestable strength – is happening.

And it can never be thwarted. Not by ego-maniacal leaders, or their misguided and vengeful followers, not by the wisdom of the sages, or the coercion of earthly power, not by the tragic dysfunction of broken systems, not by a pandemic, or brutal violence or tragic suffering, not by anything human beings can forget or demand, or mess up or succeed at.

And yes, we do a whole lot to muck it up –accidentally or on purpose. We can act like we are divided, we can kill, and blame, and shut down, and overlook each other. We can ravage our own hearts and minds and go numb or afraid – fear can make us do terrible, heartless things.

But we can wake up and remember the deeper truths. We can learn from the story of Epiphany and the wise ones following the light. Newell summarizes the truths we can learn from Pelagius, themes of sacredness that clashed with the way empire worked.

The sacredness of the human soul – people are not just there to be controlled or used,
but treated with reverence and encouraged to build relationships

The sacredness of nature – we must honor the body of the earth as a living body

The sacredness of spiritual practice – truth is offered not only from those in power,
but accessed from deep within everyone

The sacredness of wisdom – it is found in all people, all religions, all cultures

The sacredness of compassion – see, feel and act in ways that show concern for others (3)

All of these go against the inequities upon which empire thinking was built.

We have much to unlearn about faith and spirituality. It can be hard. It can be exciting. It can be disorienting.

As we read Newell's book together, reflect on Celtic Wisdom for today, and explore this way of seeing the sacred in everyone and everything, may we remember the story of Epiphany and remember deeper truths. Amen.

1) Rev. Kara Root, "Perspective," Jan. 10, 2021, in the hereandnow

<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2021/01/perspective.html>

2) John Philip Newell (2021) *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*, Harper One. Pages 11-12

3) Newell, page 40.