

Epiphany January 5-6, 2019  
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Sometimes, what we see or hear around us is very different from our expectations. In today's reading from Isaiah, we have one of those occasions. When the people heard these words, the scene in front of them was devastating. You see, the situation we have here is that they were returning from exile in Babylon. When the Babylonians conquered Israel, they destroyed Jerusalem. It was still in ruins. Everything, including the temple, would have to be rebuilt. That's what they had come home to. Yet, the words we hear from the prophet don't match up with what they see. The prophet is talking about splendor, glory, shining radiance, an overflowing heart, and the wealth of nations. He also mentions camels from far off lands that will bring gold and frankincense and that there will be people proclaiming the praises of the Lord. Since they were looking at a city that was completely destroyed, these words from Isaiah must have sounded completely out of touch with reality. They might have been wondering, "either I'm missing something here, or Isaiah is nuts!" At the very least, they were completely taken by surprise by these words. They just didn't make sense with the reality in front of them.

But with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, we can see that Isaiah's words are a prophecy that is fulfilled in today's gospel. Men from a foreign land come on camels, delivering gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Also in today's gospel we have a group of people who expected something very different from what was actually happening. The religious and political leaders of the people were not expecting their Messiah to come in this manner, so it never occurred to them to be on the lookout for this scenario. Their expectations were of a mighty warrior king who would put down the Romans and guide Israel to be a free nation once again. Because of their expectations, they thought this new king would come in glory, and it would probably be an event they would already know about. So, when the Magi told them their new king had been born, they were totally unprepared for this news. The leaders didn't know it yet, but their new king was being born in total poverty; surrounded by barn animals; in a cold stable. This didn't set with what they expected, or what they wanted.

Does it match up with what we want or expect? That's a hard and challenging question. On the one hand, we're so used to the story that it doesn't surprise us. On the other hand, it should shake us to the core of what we believe and how we live.

All of this makes me think about the situations we've seen in life where we hear about something that's happened and we jump to conclusions about what's going on. Later, we find out it wasn't at all what we thought. There was more to the story, but we go right to the conclusion we think is most likely. We should learn from those situations, but all too often we do the same thing the next time something similar happens. We like to think we know exactly what's happening, even though we don't know the whole story.

How about a story to illustrate this point?

A good number of years ago, there was an old, poor man who had become rather crippled. The neighborhood boys made fun of him and they called him Old Rattle Bones. The leader of the boys was named Freddie, and one day he saw the man heading right to his own house. He tried to act tough in front the other boys and he made fun of the old man. Freddie's mom invited the man in and she called Freddie to come home. Once inside, the old man turned to Freddie and told him this story.

"Years ago, on the very first day of spring, a young mother took her baby out for a carriage ride along the river. She spotted a flower and reached down for it. When she did, she let go of the handle and the carriage started to roll down the hill. I was sitting on a bench nearby and I heard

her screams. I tried to catch up with the carriage, but it plunged into the river. After a struggle to get the baby free of the carriage, I finally got the baby back on shore. Now, because it was so early in the springtime, the river was still very cold. It severely aggravated my rheumatism, and now, ten years later, I can scarcely hobble along. Freddie, you need to know, that baby was you.”

Freddie hung his head in shame and started to cry. “Thank you for saving me, he wept. Can you ever forgive me for calling you Old Rattle Bones? I didn’t know who you were.”

The Jewish leaders did something like that when the Magi told them about this newborn king. They thought they already knew the whole story, but they couldn’t have been more wrong. They let their preconceived ideas control what they would believe.

We don’t want to be like those leaders. Years later, when they appeared before Jesus at their personal judgement, they probably would have said to Him, “We didn’t know who you were.” He might have said back to them, “you knew the Scriptures. You should have been able to read the signs.” But they were so busy holding onto their expectations, they couldn’t recognize what Isaiah had foretold when camels and men came from foreign lands bringing gifts and praising the Lord.

It's kind of ironic that it was these magi who were able to read the signs, make a long journey, and fulfill Isaiah's prophecy. They were able to see what wasn't obvious to everybody else. I also think it's interesting to note that these magi were probably wealthy men. They may have been surprised at the circumstances of this baby's birth, but they didn't let that stop them from paying homage to this poor baby and then presenting their precious gifts to Him. Let's also remember that the others who came to visit Jesus in the manger were the poor shepherds who heard the angels proclaiming the good news. That means that the rich and the poor came to see this child.

That reminds us that this precious child came for everyone, whether they could see the big picture or not.

Let's be like the magi and the shepherds. They didn't let their lack of knowing the whole story stop them from going to find out more.

The Magi especially, had to endure a long, dangerous journey across the desert to follow the signs they were seeing. Nothing turned them away from what they were looking for. Do you think that God called these people to an important mission in His plan of salvation? Yes, absolutely He did. Now, I wonder who else He calls. Maybe, Us?

Now, our call will be different from the magi and the shepherds, but He does call us each of us to fulfill our role in salvation history.

Now, don't sit there and think you don't have a role in this. Everyone has something that God has called them to do. That's why He created you. No one gets a dispensation from this. Your role may not be to travel for many days across the desert to greet the newborn king, but there is a special purpose for each and every one of us. Our job is to figure out what that role is, and then to follow Jesus as we strive to fulfill that role.