

Epiphany 2012  
Robert VerEecke, S.J.

This past Thursday I was driving to Long Island for a little Christmas visit to my mother and a chance to see the new Cenacle Retreat house in Ronkonkoma. While I was driving I was mulling over the feast of the Epiphany and the journey of the Magi, wondering if my journey would have an Epiphany moment, an “aha”, a “now I see God’s in breaking.”

I was travelling during the day so there was no “star” to guide me. Not that I needed one, or a GPS, since I had made the journey many times before. But I was westward leading like those Magi so I was open to any of those wonder-filled Epiphany moments that God graciously provides. On the journey what I noticed was that even though I had followed the same route countless times, how important signs, landmarks, guideposts, were for me. In fact they are always the same. I pay more attention when I’m looking for Exit 9 on the pike, Rein’s Deli, Charter Oak Bridge, Wilbur Cross Parkway, Milford exit, Bridgeport ferry. And if I’m not paying attention and I don’t see one of these signs or familiar landmarks, I panic. Where am I going? Am I on the right road? Did I miss the turn off? And then, aha, you see it. Rein’s Deli, 3 miles ahead. Familiar landmark. You’re ok.

Admittedly it is harder to “get lost” in these days of GPS devices. If you make a wrong turn, you’ll hear that voice say “recalculating”. It may take you by a circuitous route but, usually, if you listen closely, you’ll reach your destination. In the story of the magi, those wise sky readers, their GPS is a star that is their guiding light. In the story, the star comes and goes. Now they see it, now they don’t. The star that they follow is interpreted as a sign of something extraordinary that has happened in the world. In the words of the magi, it is a sign that a king has been born, a new leader who they have traveled great distances to seek and find.

The Gospel story of the magi is one of the most wonder-filled of all the Gospel stories. As no doubt you know, it is not intended to be a historical account but rather an overture that sounds some of the themes of the life of the child born to be Emmanuel, God with us.

The story is filled with “signposts”, not just the star for the Magi but “signposts” for those who heard the Gospel story to lead them to a moment

of “recognition”, and, aha! This child is the Chosen One, the Messiah, the King, the “showing forth” of God’s love in the world. And as we hear the Gospel today, we too are meant to “find our way”, to be led to the place (in this case the house/not the manger) where we can come to recognize the chosen one. Epiphany means showing forth and the story is filled with all these “signposts, land marks, guiding lights.”

What are some of those “signposts” or “landmarks” or “guiding lights”? First, there is the star that leads the magi to the place where they find whom they are seeking. The Magi themselves are signs symbolizing the Gentiles who recognize Jesus as the Promised Messiah. There is the character of Herod, not unlike the Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, who has the innocents killed although Joseph and Mary escape just as Moses himself was saved. This Herod signpost is meant for the Jewish hearers to see the connection between Moses and Jesus who Matthew sees as the new Moses, the great teacher of the law. This theme of violence against the innocent will of course come to its full orchestration in Christ’s death on the cross. And there the “new born” King of the Jews who the magi have found will have the inscription above his head: King of the Jews. And the gifts? These “show forth” the splendor and Glory of God found in the birth of this child, echoing Isaiah 60, all will come bearing gifts of Gold and incense. The myrrh and addition on Matthew’s part striking a minor chord, since myrrh was a burial spice.

All of what you have just heard from me about “journeying,” seeking someone of ultimate importance in the world, re-cognition, God’s breaking through and showing forth his eternal love in unexpected times and places, springs from the journey that I have been on for the past three days. As I mentioned, the purported reason for the journey was a “little Christmas” visit to my mother who now lives in a nursing home in Long island. But I was looking for that Epiphany moment. Since she at 96 years of age has lost most of her cognition, my expectation of whom I would find when I reached my destination was minimal. I didn’t expect an “aha” moment for her where she would recognize me as her son. She had been a guiding light, a shining star, for 95 and a half of her 96 years and now I knew the light of that star was barely a flicker. But to my great surprise and delight she was “having a good day”, as my sister-in-law Patty said. That meant that she was more animated than usual. As we sat at the kitchen table in my brother’s house and I showed her pictures of her, my father and four of the five boys from 1953, I pointed to her and she said “that’s me.” And who is that? “That’s dad. He

was so handsome.” And I asked if she knew who the rest of us were. “I don’t know.” She didn’t know who ‘the boys’ were but she recognized herself and the love of her life, my dad.

This was the moment of “epiphany” for me, the moment of “aha!”, the moment of “Now I see!” As I set out on this little Christmas journey, I was disoriented, having some sense of where I was going, but not knowing what I would find. Deep down I trusted that the star would appear that would show me the way to God’s showing forth of his love, as he did in the gospel story. In a child, so vulnerable, so dependent on other’s care. In a woman of 96, so vulnerable, so dependent on other’s care, but still a “star of wonder, star of might, star with royal beauty bright.” AHA!