



Harold “Skip” Masback, III
“Happy Epiphany!”
Focal Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

*1 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.*
*2 For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.*
*3 Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*
*4 Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away ,and your
daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms.*
*5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.*
*6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
All those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
And shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.*

Matthew 2:1-2

*1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,
2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:
6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah:for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”
7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, when the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

My Dad was not a religious man. The closest thing he had to devotional fervor was his undying love for the New York Baseball Giants. In one season alone he saw over fifty-two Giant home games.

So it won't surprise you that when I was only five years old, my Dad decided it was time to take me on a pilgrimage to the closest thing he had to a sacred shrine. I speak, of course, of the Giants home field, the Polo Grounds.

Now we had one of those huge TV cabinets with a tiny little screen, so I had seen the Giants play at the Polo Ground many times in grainy black and white. And, since we drove in to see my grandparents in Manhattan almost every Sunday after church, I'd seen the outside of the battered old Polo Grounds many times as we drove south on the Major Deegan Expressway.

But for all the times I'd seen the inside of the stadium on TV, for all the times I'd seen the outside of the stadium from the Major Deegan, nothing could possibly have prepared me for the wonder I experienced the first time I saw the field for myself. After a long, uncomfortable drive down sooty city streets, my dad gripped my hand, tugging me along a winding walk through crowded parking lots, bustling stadium lines, and dingy interior ramps. Suddenly, as we emerged from a shadowed stadium tunnel, there it was: the most beautiful, sundrenched expanse of grass I had ever seen. Add the expectant hubbub of the gathering crowd, the insistent cries of the vendors, the smell of the wafting clouds of cigar smoke, the intermittent crack of the batting practice bat, and the sight of a young Willy Mays shagging flies in center field and you have one of life's great, unforgettable experiences.

Why did we make the long, hot trip down to see a game we could have watched on TV? Well, we went for the same reason you travel to Arizona to see a Grand Canyon you could have viewed in a video, the same reason you travel to Florence to see a Michelangelo's David you could have seen on a poster, the same reason you travel to Las Vegas to hear Wayne Newton sing a song you could have heard on a cd. Ok, maybe not the Wayne Newton part, but you get my point.

We don't go to prove that the thing exists. We don't even go to learn its dimension or contours. We go to experience it for ourselves. We don't want to know it from afar or from the outside looking in, we want to experience the real thing up close and personal.

I imagine that's why the Wise Men saddled up for their trip to Bethlehem as well. They weren't content just to **see** the Bethlehem star. They didn't just trudge dutifully back to their astrological charts and note: "December 25: Predicted star appears. God's existence proved. God's prophesied Messiah born. Time for bed." No, just as soon as they saw the star they saddled up the camels and trekked 1200 miles to Bethlehem.

They weren't just interested in the **reports** or the **descriptions** or even the **facts** of God's existence, they wanted the **experience** of God's presence. They wanted to behold the love of God lived in a human life, pay homage to the source of all life, and be, as the gospel says, "overwhelmed with joy".

American philosopher and scientist, William James captured some of this distinction between following second-hand reports, descriptions or even purported proofs of spiritual reality on the one hand and seeking first hand experiences of the spiritual reality itself on the other with his terms “secondhand” religion and “firsthand” religion. According to James, secondhand religion turns on believing and obeying what one has been told by others: about believing or doing what the Bible says, or what the preacher says, or what the doctrines demand. Giving your intellectual assent to something you have only heard about but never experienced for yourself.

“Firsthand” religion, on the other hand turns on direct, personal experience – not what someone else has told you. It is your own encounter with those experiences to which the Bible testifies. It is a movement past a description toward a personal participation in the reality itself. It is what Job means when he says to the Lord: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” (42:5)

Now, to be sure, every faith journey has elements of both secondhand and firsthand religion, and every day of church life offers both elements of assent to beliefs handed down to us by others and elements of personal experience of the love of God. Both secondhand and firsthand religion are important, but deep down, don’t all of us yearn for firsthand experience?

We are interested, intrigued, even curious to know the **fact** of God’s existence; but we yearn, we long, we hunger for the **experience** of God’s presence. When our child is suffering of a wasting disease, when our marriage falters over some soul sickening betrayal, when our career stalls and loses meaning, when our nights are haunted by an unshakeable guilt, when our lives seem leaden and empty, it is no comfort to know that a stand-off God exists carefully engineering the mechanics of the stars.

We don’t really want a celestial explosion, a historical artifact or a theological proof. We want what the prophets promised. We want what the wise men experienced. We want what Epiphany celebrates: in Jesus the Christ our God has come among us, with us, for us in the splendor and in the muck, in the joy and in the sorrow, on the mountain tops and in the valleys of life. Jesus, our savior, the physician of souls, shall be known as Emmanuel, **God with us**. If we could experience that – if we could just experience that truth for ourselves – we, too, would be overwhelmed with joy.

And, here’s the thing: to know, to really know the soul saving truth of this promise, we don’t need to be an astronomer, an historian or a theologian. Like the Wise men, we need to saddle up our camels and start the long trek to our own spiritual Bethlehems. We need to step off on a pilgrimage to our own epiphany.

You see, just as God called Abraham in the land Ur, just as God called the Israelites at the base of Sinai, just as God called the disciples tending their nets by their Galilean lake, just as God called the Puritans out of their exile in the Netherlands, so God has called us out as a pilgrim people.

Richard Neibuhr has written, “pilgrims are people in motion passing through territories not their own seeking something we might call completion.” The essence of this journey is transformation. We begin so

encumbered with material attachments, ego needs, pride and insecurity that there is precious little room for trust in God. But the trails of pilgrims are always strewn with excess baggage, and as our mustard seed of trust in God slowly grows so our need for our worldly encumbrances gradually diminishes. Slowly, but surely, as we follow in the footsteps of our pilgrim savior, we'll ease our white knuckled grip on the grasping, clawing, clamorous materialism of modern life and listen faithfully, patiently, attentively for the still small voice of the Spirit.

Then, as Isaiah promised, out of the thick darkness covering our lives the Lord will arise upon us and his glory will appear over us. Then we shall see and be radiant; and our hearts shall thrill and rejoice. Happy Epiphany! **Amen.**