

Isa 60:1-6
Ps 72
Eph 3:2-3, 5-6
Matt 2:1-12

Francis J. Caponi, O.S.A.

Whatever else the feast of the Epiphany may be, whatever role it plays in the life of Jesus, and whatever place of honor it holds in the calendar of the Church, every child knows its true meaning: Christmas vacation is over, and school is back in session. As a kid, just hearing the word “epiphany” used to make my stomach scrunch and my pulse jump, as I felt the primal nausea shared by all students when, after a long and happy break, school once again closed its claws and snatched us away from our sleds and snowballs and, more importantly, our televisions.

In fact, so much did this feast distress me as a child that one year my older brother and I developed a terrific plan to avoid returning to school, a plan firmly rooted in Scripture. Throughout the Christmas season, right up until today, dreams are key to the story of the coming of Christ. Joseph has several dreams, in which God tells him to marry Mary, to name their child Jesus, to go to Egypt, and then to come back. And as we just heard, the magi receive a dream warning them not to return to Herod. Listening to these stories, my brother, Joe, and I hit upon a plan. On this very day, the feast of the Epiphany, after we had returned home from Mass, we approached our mother and informed her that an angel had appeared to us in a dream and warned us not to go back to school. Of course, *we* were anxious to return, but the matter was out of our hands. God had spoken.

My mother, though not formally trained in theology, was a judicious and efficient interpreter of Holy Writ. She informed us that we *would* be going back to school, since it was exceedingly unlikely that we had received a genuine angelic visitation. Shocked, shocked we were at such disbelief, and we protested vigorously. What if Joseph or the magi had disregarded their angelic dreams, we asked. What would have become of the Christ child if the recipients of dreams had not promptly complied with God’s demands? How could we, poor, humble servants of the Lord, do any less than Saint Joseph himself, and the wise men of the Orient?

Mom was unmoved. “Believe me,” she said, “that was not an angel in your dreams.” When we asked how she could be so certain, she replied, “Because God respects the chain of command. If He doesn’t want you to go to school, an angel will appear to *me*, not to you.”

For all our bad use of Scripture, my brother and I had at least listened closely enough to appreciate the importance of dreams in the Christmas season. Simply put, Jesus’ life depends upon dreams. Had Joseph followed through on his intention to divorce Mary, what would have happened to her and her unborn child? Who would have protected them? To whom could she have turned for help? And if Joseph and the magi had not done as God commanded them in their dreams, could Jesus have escaped the wrath of Herod? Would not the Lord also have fallen beneath the evil king’s sword?

What does this mean for us? Consider that all the dreams we hear about in the Christmas season involve a change of plans. God asks men to put aside their own goals and aspirations, and to accept His will. Joseph had plans: they did not include being a young celibate husband, or raising a child who was not his own. The magi had plans: they did not include an encounter with a homicidal king or a dangerous race to escape his jurisdiction. And, thanks be to God, all these dreamers gave up their plans, and humbly accepted God's plans, so that the Light might come into the darkness.

Schedules and plans are important. Bills are paid, medicines are developed, food is grown and delivered to stores and airplanes get us where we're going because people are organized. They compose lists, they set goals, they make preparations. Plans are good - but like every good thing, they can be abused, they can take over, they can become idols. All of us are so busy, with kitchen calendars and daytimers brimming with demands on our time, with chores and errands and appointments and commitments that just keep coming and coming. All of you probably know someone who begins every conversation with the words, "Oh my gosh, I have been running all day, you have no idea how busy I am, I haven't had two seconds to myself..." I'm sure none of you start conversations that way, but all of us know people who do.

Where in the midst of our plans is their room for God's unexpected appearance? We who celebrate the Light of the world shining forth from a poor child in a humble home, we who celebrate God Himself becoming one of us, eating and drinking in our midst and dying at our hands, we of all people should know that the Lord shows up in unexpected places, in dreams and visions and transfigurations, and in the poor, in the sick, in the dying, in the lonely, in the stranger. How many times in this Christmas season, rushing about with a long list of things to do in hand, have we found ourselves rushing past the poor, half-consciously making a resolution to schedule some time soon to be more generous to those need? Have our many plans and busy days been disrupted by a visit to the nursing home or hospital, a visit to the cemetery, a few minutes alone with Scripture?

Christ is inconvenient. When we come to Mass, he is here. When we go to confession, he is there. When we pick up the Bible, Christ is at our side. But Christ is also there when we don't have the time, when we weren't planning on it, when our schedule is already full. Today, the feast of the Epiphany, is the feast of broken schedules, when our salvation was made possible because Mary said "Yes" and Joseph said "Yes" and the magi said "Yes," even though they had other plans in mind. Today, the feast of the Epiphany, you will meet Jesus Christ beyond these walls, in very inconvenient people and at very unplanned moments. A sick friend, a lonely relative, a whispering voice, just as we are sitting down to watch the game or getting ready to head to the store, that we should take some time today to pray.

Let us pray at this Mass for the same gift God gave the wise men: the power to see an unexpected star in the midst of all the other usual lights in the nighttime sky. May we see the unexpected Christ as he comes to us today and tomorrow, in the midst of all the usual things on our busy daily schedules.