

EPIPHANY - 2007
“High Drama”

As we walked into the church today, we may well have said to ourselves, *“Oh, that’s right, we’re still celebrating Christmas.”* Long gone are the trappings of the so-called “holiday season” now replaced with Valentine chocolates, as if we needed more chocolates. So the poinsettias, lighted fir trees and wreaths may have caught us by surprise. Like Mary, as she looked at her child in the manger, or when they finally found him in the temple when he was twelve, the church encourages us to ponder the events of the Christmas season in our hearts. It asks us to look beyond the obvious, to find the treasures that lie hidden from view.

This week, it’s a flashback to the crib scene again, and the story of the magi, the wise men who followed the extraordinary star. It has all the ingredients of high drama: wealthy strangers, a mysterious star, a curious king, ominous danger, holy dreams, a threatened baby, a great escape. There is the battle between light and darkness, the joy of discovery at the end of a long journey. And truth foils deceit.

Some of our more fundamentalist-oriented brothers and sisters are nervous that the magi are called astrologers. But that’s what they were. In that time, they represented the wise ones, star-gazers, people of philosophy, science, and treasure. They are people of the world searching for truth. And when they find it, they do it homage. But it’s not to the powerful Herod, or to the sun, or to the earth or even to themselves. It’s to a baby. And this deepens the mystery.

The Jesuit, Father John Kavanaugh, observes that Herod was not only a liar and murderer, but also that he was afraid. How could this defenseless baby threaten him? What power did it have? Father Kavanaugh says the

baby Jesus had no power other than the strength to engage our hope. If a tyrant wants to remain in power, he must do all he can to squash peoples' hope. Keep them poor. Keep them ignorant. Keep them dependent. When people have hope, they have energy to change the *status quo*, to make things better. They can even change the world, and that's the last thing dictator's want. Jesus came to change things!

There is a line from Luke's nativity story that puzzles me. The angel says to the shepherds, "*And this will be a sign to you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.*" The baby in the manger will be a sign. A sign of what? If Fr. Kavanaugh is right, the baby is a sign of hope. Not just Jesus, but the baby Jesus, in all his vulnerability, weakness, and helplessness. That is the sign of hope. We cannot look at a baby without thinking thoughts of hope.

Babies have a way of pulling things out of us that we never knew were there. I mentioned to you not long ago of a young mother who, after having a baby, said to her mother, "*You never told me.*" "*I never told you what?*" her mother asked. "*You never told me how much I would love my baby.*" The love that was inside that young mother shocked her. It hadn't been there before. Her baby had changed her.

But this is not a good time for babies. Children are a threat to many in our world. They are the easiest to slaughter, little Muslims in the Balkans, tiny Catholics in the Sudan, Toddling Hutu or Tutsi in Rwanda. They are seen only as future soldiers, would-be enemies by the Herods of our world today. Many in authority don't seem to be concerned by the millions of children orphaned because of AIDS, or their starving as refugees.

In a world where we pride ourselves of being in control of our destinies, who wants to have some little child upset everything? Children

torment the occupants of a self indulgent culture. How could they not afflict a people bent on instant gratification? Two o'clock feedings, constant watching, demands on time and energy when we are bushed? I mean, what will happen to my climb up the corporate ladder not to mention our bank account or those vacations in the sun? Why be bothered? Many a child has been aborted in response to questions just like these, and countless other kids who were born are pretty much on their own after a few years, emotionally abandoned by their parents. But God did not give us hope by sending in the cavalry to rescue us, or by coming on a white stallion, or by swinging on a spider's thread. He came as a baby.

While so many in our world today claim to be enlightened, they are afraid of the power of a baby to change things. They cannot or will not look at the baby as a sign of hope. Instead of learning the power of a baby to make our world a better place, they deny it freedom, maybe even life.

But those who embrace Epiphany resist. Like the magi, as Father Kavanaugh says, "*They search out the child. They exercise wisdom in humble homage.*" Their dreams for our world flow from the hope a baby signifies. All of our wisdom, our science, our gifts of human treasure, must not be used for the tyranny of tribe, class, nation or ego. That would be the foolishness. In the Epiphany dream, all of our gifts are laid at the feet of the child, not only in Bethlehem, but in all the cities of the world. That is wisdom.

It is little wonder that Mary pondered what had happened in that stable in Bethlehem. Her baby would change the world? Yes, but only because he grew in wisdom, age and grace. Finally, nothing could stop him, not even death. As we continue this Eucharist, may that Spirit of Hope continue the transformation of our hearts.