

Feast of the Epiphany Cycle B January 8, 2012
Isaiah:60:1-6 Ephesians 3:2-3a,5-6 Matthew 2:1-12

Why have faith?

Why believe that Jesus, born in Bethlehem by way of a Virgin birth, raised in Nazareth north of Jerusalem, used Nazareth as a 30-year cocoon before leaving for the real world, preached the Kingdom of Heaven being in our midst, performed countless miracles and taught teachings that are still relevant 2000 years later, was crucified for those same teachings, and was raised from the dead by his heavenly Father. Why believe all this?

Isn't it easier to say "no" and do our own thing? Wouldn't life be much simpler if we just created our own set of rules, set our own personal standards, and created our own belief system and ways of relating to those around us? Yes, I know. Many already do this.

But why have faith that Jesus is God? Does it *really* make a difference in how we conduct our lives? (I hope you don't think I'm going to answer all these questions!)

Why have faith? Why allow our hearts to be touched in ways and in places where heaven and earth meet? Where we can find the hand of an angel touching our shoulder when we most need it?

Faith is a gift. Some have it, some don't. Some pretend to have it when they really don't. And no one pretends not to have it when they do. Some receive the gift of faith in ways that others would consider to be most natural. Sort of like drinking cold water – or for some, a cold beer – on a hot summer day. "Look at Mrs. Smith and her friend Mrs. Cessna. They have a natural faith in all those rosaries they say. It's a gift from God!"

Others, however, are not granted from above the gift of faith to the degree of, say, Mary. Or Joseph. Many of us have to make a choice...each day. Is Jesus the Way? Or, is the world the way? Jesus and the world are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are polar opposites. "My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus says to Pilate.

Truth be told, most of us go through much struggle, turmoil, uncertainty, and being knocked down by life in order to arrive at what is called a "working faith" in Jesus. Faith that is active, relevant, and a daily choice. Faith always remains a gift. But it's a gift we can refuse. For most of us, the words, "I choose to follow Christ, regardless of what comes with my life," is the M.O. of people with an active faith.

A heavenly secret; the hard fought faith, the faith of choice, is more precious in the eyes of God than a natural, easy, free-flowing, seemingly gifted faith. Having faith in Jesus that is lived as a result of the school of hard knocks is a faith that takes hard work and perseverance. Sort of like working for UPS during those four weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's a lot of work!

So this week we have the Three Wise Men. (Moe, Larry, and Curly. Or Shemp if you like). Their faith is not of the natural sort. The faith of the three wise men is not that of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. To come to Christ, they must travel a dangerous road filled with chances. Chances that make the Patriots winning the Super Bowl look like an absolute certainty. The odds of the 3 wise men making it in one piece to the presence and crib of Jesus are so much higher than our dear Patriots hoisting the Vince Lombardi Trophy as world champions. The faith of the 3 wise men is a working, hard-fought faith. And they make the choice to continue on.

First, they have to cross a desert on camels. Ever try this? Neither have I! Crossing the desert is a proper image for our lives. Our journey is a trip from our homes to Jerusalem, where the Three Wise Men arrive in Jerusalem. Wherever we presently find ourselves, we are in the midst of crossing the desert of this world to the heavenly Jerusalem. It's a working faith with sand storms and other particles thrown into our face along the way.

Secondly, they appear before a king. This being Herod. It's dangerous to appear before a king who is threatened by the birth of a tiny, defenseless child!

To come before the powers of this world - like the Magi before Herod, or Jesus before Pilate, or the many Christian martyrs before all those crazy Roman rulers in the first few centuries of the Church - while respecting authority, is to recognize an equal in need of God's mercy, just as we are. We have a working faith when our perception of those called to authority are seen in the light of divine mercy and guidance. Herod needed Jesus as much as the Three Wise Men did. Maybe Herod was so evil because enough people didn't pray for him?

And third, from the desert to the king, the Magi travel the volatile, yet the most blessed part of the journey of working faith; the path that leads directly to Christ. Most of us, if not all of us, are presently on this path. We know it's fraught with the dangers of sickness and disease. The curse of death is ever before us. But at the same time, we trust this path to be one of grace. Danger and grace, simultaneously, is a recipe for a working faith. It's not the faith of Mary, who is full of grace and chosen for a specific role from the beginning of time. Thanks be to God! Our faith is closer to the faith of the Apostles, who stumbled much along the way. They needed to see Jesus alive after his death in order to further their faith. That would have been us 2000 years ago.

So why have faith as Gentiles who have become Christians? Because, like the Magi, our arrival will happen. We will stand – and kneel – before God. Our working faith on the path is the best present to bring to the crib. To the crib of heaven.

For us normal people called to be saints, it is a gift. But it's also a choice.