

Wonder – Wander:
Epiphany

Here we are, in the movement of the Epiphany season—a time and space to consider the following:

- You never know where something is going to come from
- It's about more than you realize
- You are asked to be part of it

The place was Murphy, North Carolina, and the time was July 16, 1933.

The Morgan family, revivalists all, were about to be ejected by the police, after having camped in the town square for some little time, cooking, washing, hanging their wash from the Confederate monument and generally conducting themselves in such a way as to be classed a public nuisance.

Preacher Morgan and his wife pled poverty; they had to hold one more meeting in order to buy enough gas to get out of town. It was then that a girl stepped out to the edge of the little platform attached to the automobile. Her clothes were unbelievable dirty and ragged, and she, too, was unwashed. Her ash-blond hair hung down in long skeins.... She was very lovely but best of all, in her untutored way, she could sing. She said her name was Annie, and she smiled as she sang, smiled rather sadly, and sang little more than a line or two of a song. She repeated the fragment seven times in exchange for

twenty-five cents per performance from a man who was looking on and listening and trying to get her to sing all the song. At the eighth try, though, for all his coin-coaxing and note-taking, he had only three lines of verse and a garbled fragment of melodic material.” What had little Annie Morgan sung?

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die
For poor on'ry people like you and like I...*

And it stopped there. But it didn't. For the man doling out the quarters, Appalachian composer John Jacob Niles, had a “magnificent idea,” he writes in his unpublished autobiography. Less than three months later he had extended the melody to four lines and the lyrics to three stanzas. Song-writer John Jacob Niles: was he a wise man for knowing a good tune when he heard it, a shepherd for nurturing the song to completion, or, perhaps, he was Mary to little Annie Morgan's Gabriel voice. He admits “I sang it for five years in my concerts before it caught on. [Of course, since] then, it has been sung by soloists and choral groups wherever the English language is spoken and sung" (john-jacob-niles.com 7 Jan 2011).

The point is, whether the time is Advent, Christmas or Epiphany and the space Murphy North Carolina, Bethlehem or Forest Hills, you never know where something is going to come from, it's about more than you

realize, and you are asked to be part of it. That's what an epiphany does. It is something out there that beckons you closer. It is like Christmas after the visit of the Magi. "Christmas is not meant to leave us with nothing more than a ... perception of what it means to see a baby in a manger scene. It is meant to take us to the level of spiritual maturity where we are capable of seeing in a manger the meaning of the empty tomb" (Chittister, *The Liturgical Year* 88)—those gifts of gold for a king, frankincense as prayer rising to God, and myrrh as a salve for the very body that would be given for our salvation.

*If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing...
He surely could have it 'cause he was the King*

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die*

"In ancient times, the church thought of Christmas as the Passover of Jesus from heaven to earth because of which the Great Pasch, the Passover of Jesus from earth to heaven, was really possible" (88). "What's more, with the opening of the heavens on the bank of the Jordan at the Baptism of Jesus, we all have our first vision (Epiphany) of life beyond life. Yes, Christmas is larger than a baby in a manger; and this is not a Christian child only. This One belongs to the world. Christmas is the coming of a whole new world. More than that, it is what makes that world possible" (93-94).

Our Advent preparation for celebration began with a baptism—John the Baptizer calling the people to repent and be on the way. And today, Christmas culminates with the Epiphany of the Baptism of Jesus. Stirred by the river's flowing waters we are reminded that we celebrate not as a community in place but on the move. The cops might not be running us out of town but our message to a world of diminished hopes is revival... not survival. The same message needs to be heard by us in the church. In an age of things not being the way they used to be, of expenses looming larger than resources, of merger and consolidation, taking action so as to keep the lights on is not action enough, and is rather more a reaction. For our mission is to be light to the nations. The mission of the church is to commit to Christ for God's work of reconciliation. The mission of the church is to be the church, in whatever shape or form is relevant and workable, dynamic at particular times in history. The mission of the church is to people who "out there" do not know and feel yet what we celebrate "in here": that "high from God's heaven a star's light did fall/And the promise of ages it then did recall/ for such on'ry people as you and as I" Christ, Savior Jesus, came willing to die.

In a world where the things we thought we knew seem less secure or even slipping away, the challenge in our becoming agents of Christ's reconciliation is having the courage of faith to wonder and to wander...

To wonder what God has in store is to look beyond the ‘as is,’ open to God’s epiphany of what yet can be. To wander is to extend one’s self in that direction with a fluidity of movement rather than an insistent fixity on keeping things ‘as is.’ This phenomenon of religious living is our challenge and calling whether we have lost a loved one or we feel we are losing our way or things are changing in the world, the nation, the church, or our very bodies. Jesus the Savior did come for to give us sense to recognize there is yet something else. What we thought was so important or the way things had to be, what we are left with as those things go away is not a void but an opportunity to find anew the fuller meaning of our living and dying. The moments we fear will be our impoverishment and our end, can be the moments in which God comes awesomely close—Epiphany: a time and space to practice seeing things in a new way, to wonder and to wander:

- Having eyes open where you do not usually look
- Being open to more
- Not waiting to be asked

©Thomas F. Reese 9 January 2011