

Sunday, January 8, 2012 – Feast of the Epiphany
Homily – St. Leonard Home – Hollidaysburg

There is an old story, a kind of legend, about a woman in Bethlehem who met the magi that we hear about in today's Gospel reading. I don't know

- where the story came from or
- when it was written

It was probably one of those stories that was not originally written down, but passed on by word of mouth, much like we share stories within our families about various family experiences.

This woman (some versions call her Anna) was a widow and had no family. She kept the cleanest and neatest house in Bethlehem and was also the best cook in town.

When the Son of God was born, Anna heard about it from other people in Bethlehem, but she was the type of woman who kept to herself, so she didn't go to the manger to see the infant Jesus.

One day Anna heard rumors of three special travelers, Magi, who were coming across the desert with camels and horses and all sorts of treasures. Anna paid no attention to them because she had so much work to do.

Then right outside her window, Anna heard the sounds of drums and pipes and horses and camels. She looked out the window and there were three richly dressed men coming towards her house.

These Magi told her that they had come to honor the new born king who had been born in Bethlehem and they needed food and lodging. They were told that Anna's house was the best place to stay, especially since Bethlehem was overcrowded with all the people who had come to register for the census as ordered by the Roman emperor.

Anna graciously welcomed them, cooked a wonderful meal for them, and brought out her best linens and blankets for the beds. She wore herself out providing hospitality, but that's the way Anna was.

The next morning the kings begged her to come with them so she too might see the newborn king. Anna said she would follow after them as soon as she finished the dishes. She cleaned the house again and then took out of a cabinet the toys for the child she never had.

Anna put them in a basket and sat down for a moment's rest before she followed the wise men. Hours later she woke up, grabbed the basket, and rushed through the streets of Bethlehem and finally arrived at the stable.

But the Magi were gone and so were the newborn king and his parents. According to this legend, Anna never returned home that day. She spent the rest of her years following after them. Whenever she found a newborn child, she looked to see if it was the Messiah. Even if Jesus was not there, Anna left a gift for the child.

Various conclusions or interpretations have been given to this story.

- One interpretation is that Anna's life was never fulfilled because she let what she considered "essential things" (like cooking and cleaning) to interfere with what is really important.

That's not a bad lesson to be learned, but I like the interpretation or insights of Pope Benedict XVI concerning the birth of Jesus Christ and the search made by the Magi.

In his Christmas homily, the Holy Father exhorted all Christians to rejoice in the encounter with God's humility, for the mystery of Christmas is how good and mighty our God is to have concealed himself in the humility of a child!

Pope Benedict borrows this thought from St. Augustine who says, "When the cross was first preached to the few who believed, it was mocked by the multitudes. But by the power of the cross, the blind saw, the lame walked, the lepers were cleansed, and even the dead rose so that even among the powers of this world, all people would come to believe that there is, in fact, nothing more powerful than the humility of God."

A newborn child represents a truth about every one of us; that we are small, and vulnerable, and dependent on others for our good. Christ teaches us in his gospel that we need to become like children (small, vulnerable, and dependent) if we want to enter into the Kingdom of God.

In a homily concerning the Feast of the Epiphany which we celebrate today, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that the mystery of this Feast is all about the mystery of something fundamental about our human nature:

- each one of us longs to see and experience more
- each one of us longs to be or become more.

The Holy Father observes that the Magi were men of science, but not simply in the sense that they were searching for a wide range of knowledge: they wanted something more.

The Magi were men with restless hearts, not satisfied with the superficial and the ordinary.

The Magi were persons in search of God.

The Magi were watchful and they were capable of reading God's signs; not only a unique star, but God's soft and penetrating language; the language of a newborn child.

The Magi were also courageous, yet humble.

Pope Benedict suggests that we can imagine them having to endure a certain amount of mockery for setting off to find the King of the Jews, at the cost of so much effort. For them it mattered little what this or that person, what even influential and clever people thought and said about them; not even Herod the self-important and self-serving King of Judea.

For the Magi it was a question of truth itself, not human opinion. That is why they took upon themselves the sacrifices and the effort of a long and uncertain journey.

Their humble courage was what enabled them to bend down before the child of poor people and to recognize in Him the promised King, the One they had set out, on both their outward and their inward journey, to seek and to know.

Pope Benedict reminds us that our heart is restless for God and remains so, even if every effort is made today to deliver ourselves from this unrest.

It can seem for so many people to be a real anxiety or even a great burden to experience this unrest within us. But it is part of our human nature to be restless for God.

But there is one more exciting truth about this mystery of the Epiphany that Pope Benedict XVI mentions:

- Not only are we restless for God: but God's heart is restless for us.
- God is waiting for us; God is looking for us.
- God knows no rest either, until He finds us.

That is why God, in the person of Jesus Christ, set out on the path towards us, to Bethlehem, to Calvary, from Jerusalem to Galilee and on to the very ends of the earth.

It is important for us to be reminded that within the mystery of Christ's birth the truth is that

- God looks out for people willing to 'catch' His unrest,
- God is aware of people whose hearts are burning to be in touch with His passion for us,
- God is very near to people who carry within them the searching of their own hearts.

I don't know if Pope Benedict XVI knows the legend about Anna who provided hospitality for the Magi and then went in search of Christ Jesus.

However, it seems to me that the Holy Father's observations lend themselves to one more interpretation about that story of Anna's life and to our lives.

I mentioned that it has been said that Anna's life was never fulfilled because she acted too late.

The Mystery of the Epiphany, where the light of Christ, which was experienced by the Magi in a star,

- is the mystery of our lifelong search to connect with something, with someone who often seems to be out of sight and out of our reach
- is at the same time the mystery of our discovering over and over again the source of our life, our love, and the answer to our prayers and deepest desires.

This happens every single day of our lives when we hear about the latest bad news, for ourselves or others in our world and we begin to wonder, where is God in all this?

And yet, each day we begin our routine, our essential things with prayer so that we can call out to God for whom we are searching;

And we can quietly listen for God's tiny voice, softer than a newborn child, when we open our ears, our minds, and our hearts to listen to God's word in Sacred Scripture.

And we catch up to God and God catches up with us, as Pope Benedict describes that dynamic, in the most unique way whenever we gather to celebrate the Sacred Mysteries in this Holy Eucharist

- where we sit down at a table not prepared by us as Anna did for the Magi, but at a table prepared by God who welcomes us to be fed with the Body and Blood of his only Son
- where we bow down before the same Divine person who is that newborn child in Bethlehem and for whom we can present the finest gift that we have; our love for him, especially as it is manifested in the love that we share with others in his name; the kind of love that is manifested in this holy place of St. Leonard's Home.

The Magi followed the star in their search for Christ. There are plenty more like them who have followed the light that is Christ or that leads to Christ.

We should be excited to think about how we are to search for that light, follow that light, and walk in that light. As the first reading today reminds us, it is an awesome and rich vocation. Isaiah the prophet says:

Raise your eyes and look about;
you shall be radiant at what you see,
your heart shall throb and overflow,
for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you,
the wealth of nations shall be brought to you.

Those words are a great answer to the question that everyone asks right about now, "How was your Christmas?" You can tell them, "Christmas isn't over yet. In fact, I am still chasing after it. Would you care to join me?"