

Homily

Epiphany of the Lord - B

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski

January 03-04, 2026

Is 60: 1-6

Ps 72: 1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13

Eph 3: 2-3, 5-6

Mt 2: 1-12

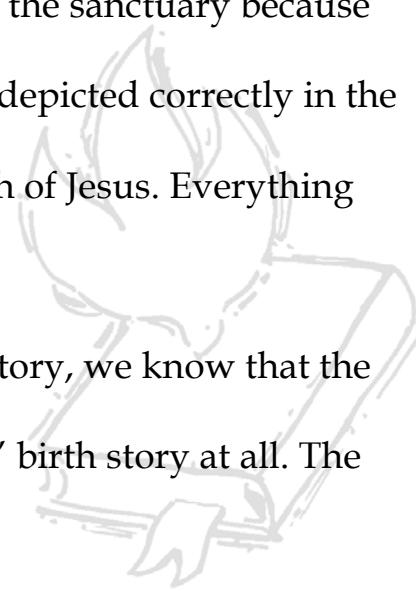


So normally I do not preach my homily on this side of the sanctuary except if there is a good reason. On this

particular Sunday on the feast of our Lord's Epiphany (or the story of the Magi), there is a good reason because I wanted to talk about this particular image that is set before us, the beautiful stable with the lights and poinsettias and the three kings and the shepherds.

I wanted to preach the homily on this side of the sanctuary because there is nothing practically in this image that is depicted correctly in the Bible the way the Bible tells the story of the birth of Jesus. Everything you see here is a lie!!!

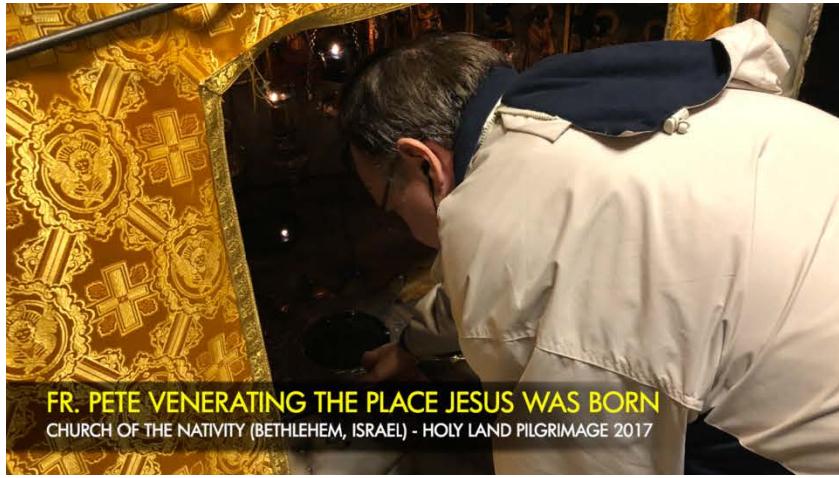
If we adhere to the bible's rendering of this story, we know that the gospels of Mark and John do not tell us of Jesus' birth story at all. The



Gospel of Luke filters the story of Jesus's birth through the character of Mary, the mother, where the angel tells the blessed mother that she will be with child by the power of the Holy Spirit. Later in Luke's telling of the story, the shepherds come in from the fields, as told by an angel, to visit Jesus and do homage.

According to the gospel of Matthew, the rendering of *that* story focuses on the character of Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus, who is connected to King David through one generation after another. Joseph adopted Jesus into the lineage of the Chosen People so that Jesus could adopt us into God's life.

What we see here in this nativity present before us, if you look all around at all these images that we have from where parents take pictures of their kids and families gather to celebrate Christmas, if you think about it, *nothing* pictured here was depicted in the Bible the way that we depicted here! In reality, Jesus was not born in a nativity but in a hole in a rock which can be viewed in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Israel. Twice I have visited hole in a rock where Jesus was born, which is signified by a star in which Jesus was laid in a manger (a



manger is like a feeding trough for animals). The location is a very small, very tight condensed spot, a

very intimate spot where God entered the world.\

If we look at this image of our nativity set, we see the shepherds gathering around a stable. There was no nativity set in either gospel. There was no pretty little animals that were depicted in the Bible. We reimagine this image based on what St. Francis of Assisi in the 13th Century, envisioning a stable with live animals in this little chapel located in Assisi, Italy.

We look at this stable with the image of three kings bringing gifts to Mary and Joseph. The gospel of Matthew tells us that the wise men were neither three nor kings but astrologers from the east, most likely of the Zoroastrian religion, who actually visited Jesus, Mary and Joseph in a house when Jesus was around two years old. As the gospel of Matthew

tells us, astrologers from the east who informed by King Herod's advisors if this child truly were the Messiah, then the location of this new king would come from Bethlehem, the home of King David.

As the story is told in Matthew, the magi visited this child in Bethlehem, presented the child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (which is why custom depicts the kings, not kings, as three). In a dream, the magi were told to return home by a different route so as not to pass King Herod, resulting in Herod murdering every male child in Bethlehem two years old or younger in a commemoration of what we call "the holy innocents," not exactly as story we want to tell to our kids at Christmastime.

As you can see, we surround the stable with Christmas trees, another image *not* found in the Bible. Most likely, the trees were part of a pagan celebration of Saturnalia, a pagan festival honoring the Roman god Saturn; trees or evergreens adorned homes to symbolize life, hope and renewal. The lights on the Christmas trees originate, I believe, from a custom started by the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther in the 16th Century, who wanted to show his children what it would look like if

stars appeared inside a house. As the story is told, Martin Luther took lit candles and attached them to a tree, which we would never do in today's age for insurance issues. Regardless, in today's age we adorn our homes with evergreen trees (fake or real) with lights that depict the stars in the sky.

Within our Catholic churches, we adorn our sanctuaries with poinsettia (in Spanish, "Noche Buena" or Christmas Eve) plants around the nativity. The origin of the poinsettia plants comes from Mexico, of all places. In the next 19th Century, the first US ambassador (at that time, minister) to Mexico was Joel Roberts Poinsett, an amateur horticulturalist. During his stay in Mexico, Poinsett came to find out that these specific plants actually bloomed in December and he brought cuttings of these plants to the United States. In this country, the "Noche Buena" plants are named after Ambassador Poinsett ("Poinsettias") and are commonplace today with any church Christmas scene.

So, in this nativity scene before us, we have this entire Christmas stable with lights, poinsettias, shepherds, and kings, none of which actually depicted in the Bible the way it is depicted right here. This

beckons the question, “Why do we depict what, essentially, is a lie at Christmastime?” In the churches where I celebrate these Masses, someone had the idea to put up three nativity sets in the sanctuary, where the Book of Blessings instructs us only to put up one set and *never* in that sanctuary so that the sacrifice on the altar to the cross remains the dominant image that we see. So... why do we depict the Christmas scene with so many lies, so to speak?

The answer to this question is the purpose of “story” in the bible. The bible is not a history, *per se*. As I teach in my university classes, there is a difference between “history” and “story” within our society. A “*history*” in today’s age is supposed to lay out the factual events that take place, the “who, what, where, when and how” that actually happened. That said, history even becomes slanted, depending on the bias (or *Sitz im Leben*) of the person telling the history, whether of bias is determined by political affiliation, geographical location or otherwise. If the person lives in the United States or China, whether the historian is a Democrat or Republican, whether the historian is a Cubs or Sox fan etc. can influence the type of history presented to us.

A *story* has a different purpose than a history does. A *story* is trying to convey a meaning and a message and is not as concerned with facts as a *history* is. The message that the Bible is trying to tell us via *story*, specifically in this case about Christmas, is rather simple. In this story about the wise men (not kings and not necessarily three) is that the magi are forecasting what Jesus will have to endure for the salvation of the world, for the salvation of us.

In this story, the wise men present Jesus three gifts: the gift of gold, (which represents kingship), the gift of frankincense (which represents holiness) and the gift of myrrh (which represents a pickling spice used to preserve a body for when one dies). Why would you give that to a child a pickling spice to preserve the child's body after death? Can you imagine what someone would do to me if I went to a child's baptism party and presented a gift of myrrh to pickle the body after death? I WOULD NEVER BE INVITED TO ANOTHER BAPTISM PARTY... EVER!!!

In this particular case, the story of the magi presenting the gift of myrrh is trying to tell us that God was born to die; God had a purpose

in coming down into the world. If we understand the theological story of all of this, God realized we would never be able to get to heaven on our own; we are not our own gods. Time after time, humanity violated the Shema from Deuteronomy 6: 4 ("I am your God and your God alone"). In the Old Testament (and even today) we kept focusing on other gods in this world as opposed to the one and only God that really counts.

Time and time again, we kept (and keep) breaking the covenant with God. We kept (and keep) abandoning God but God did not abandon us. So what God had to do like any good parent would do is set the model and way we need to live by becoming incarnate, by living with us, eating with us, sleeping with us, healing us, dying for us and rising for us – being human in every way but sin. This is not exactly the image that will embrace as they gather around the pretty stable and take pictures with the statues of the baby and his parents, surrounded by kings, shepherds and animals that most likely did not happen.

Nevertheless, we include the pictures of these kids and our families in scrapbooks so we have "extortion" and "blackmail" photos for when

the kids get older and they have kids of their own. In reality, we are going to put these images away after this celebration (if not before). We are going to pack up the nativity, the manger, the stable, the statues. We are going to throw out the poinsettias. We are going to box up the trees and the lights or put the evergreens on the curbs of our homes for the garbage collectors to take away.

Regardless of how we celebrate the secular ways of Christmas, the true image of that Christmas scene needs to stay with us. Without God, without letting God lead us and guide us, we are doomed, we are dust and on the dust, we shall return.

I find it interesting that the final stories of the Christmas season in the lectionary are preceding the readings that we have for the Season of Lent. We understand that Jesus was born to die, to suffer and die for our salvation. If you think about this, if God knew what the future held for him would he have become incarnate? Would God have stayed in the garden of Gethsemane, knowing full well what was going to happen to him, that he would have to suffer and die? The answer, of course, is yes, he would and yes, he did. God became incarnate because God loved us.

Because God loved us, we have this story of the magi that forecasts what is going to happen later on in Jesus's life for our salvation.

At St. Anne's Church, for this reason we have the image of the crutches and the wheelchair in the back of the church concerning those that have been healed by the St. Anne relic. None of us remember Matilda Cunnea; I did not know Matilda Cunnea personally. I did not know any of the people who were healed and whose crutches and chairs adorn the back of St. Anne's Church. That said, those images tell us of a story concerning how people who had enough faith came here and allowed God to heal them.

Do we have that kind of faith? Do we have that kind of strength? That is the message that the story of the Epiphany which God is trying to convey to us. God had that strength that we do not. The question is, do we have enough resolve to allow God to lead us and guide us... or do we go our own way, knowing time in and time out in the history of salvation what has happened to us when we turn away from God?

From the story that happened in the Old Testament, we learned that we do not have the strength to follow God's way; God had to suffer the

pains of our mistakes for us, just like a parent would. The story from the first century tells us this, where this loving baby grew up, was embraced by people at the beginning of Holy Week and then those same people nailed that baby-king to a cross. In today's age, we experience the same – after Christmas Day, many of our “Creasters” (those who come to Mass only on Christmas and Easter) forget the story and lose their way, people who put their own secular needs ahead of God's message and story, who put their own individual desires ahead of that of the God's message.

When we truly learn the story and message of what God was willing to do for us, then we do not pack the message away with our decorations; we keep the story alive in our hearts. We cannot view this story like many see graduation or confirmation or even baptism – the story does not end with these events; the story begins with these events that we need to live out for the rest of our lives. Yes, we can take the pretty pictures with these events and those wonderful moments, but in reality, the work *begins* the person of faith; the event is not the end. In this case, the story of the Epiphany is the starting point that essentially

God is trying to show us what we need to do to get to the other side of heaven – we need to allow God to carry us to the other side because we are not capable of getting there on our own.

Please do not forget what God has done for us, what story God is trying to tell us. Let us never forget that God loves us, that God walks with us, that God heals us and God dies for us. Let us remember that God rises for us to show us the way to heaven. Let us learn that lesson well, as learn the meaning of this Epiphany story so that we can share that lesson and this story with the people that we meet. This is our prayer.