

## God with Us (Haven Klassen)

As I reflected on the many beautiful bible stories traditionally associated with Epiphany, for some reason I also recalled one of my favourite books when I was a child. It is called *Mio, My Son* by Astrid Lindgren and it is about a little boy named Andy who was an orphan, or so everyone thought. I'd like to read a short passage from it to you:

*When I passed the fruit shop, Mrs. Lundy was standing in the doorway. She touched my chin and looked at me intently for a while. Then she said, "Would you like an apple?"*

*"Yes, thanks," I said.*

*She gave me a beautiful red apple that looked awfully good. Then she said, "Will you put a card in the mailbox for me?"*

*"Yes, I'll be happy to do that," I said. Then she wrote a few lines on a card and handed it to me...*

*I hurried to the mailbox a block away. Just as I was going to drop the card in, I noticed that it glistened and glowed like fire. Yes, the words that Mrs. Lundy had written glowed like fire! I couldn't help reading them. This what the card said:*

*"To the King*

*Faraway Land*

*The one you have long searched for is on his way. He travels by day and by night. And he carries in his hand the sign, a beautiful golden apple."*

*I didn't understand a word of it, but it sent shivers up and down my spine. I quickly dropped the card in the mailbox. Who was traveling by day and by night? Who was carrying a golden apple in his hand?*

*Then I caught sight of the apple that Mrs. Lundy had given me. And the apple was gold.*

I don't know about you, but when I get a shiver up my back like that, I take notice. I think of it as God trying to get my attention and show or tell me something. Or God just saying remember who you are, my child, remember who you are. It's easy to forget. And so much is competing for our attention. But God has so many voices. Like birdsong. Have you ever walked close to a hedgerow in the wintertime when the leaves are gone and it looks completely dead and still, and then, just as you get close, it shudders and shakes and suddenly there are all these tiny birds singing and flying about? That gives me shivers. Sometimes the spine tingles are accompanied by a feeling of rightness or confirmation. Not long after I met Joel, my husband, we were on opposite sides of the country and randomly picked up and started reading *Poor Folk* by Fyodor Dostoevsky at the same time. While it caused us to reflect a bit on what our financial situations might be like if we remained together, it also was a coincidence that was hard to ignore. What are the chances? So, in Matthew's birth narrative there is a star, or maybe a cluster of stars, that gets the attention of some magi far away, and its rising is significant enough to compel them to undertake a significant journey to find the one whose birth it announces. Later on, a shared dream is spine tingling enough to guide them home and away from the homicidal King Herod.

There's something about stars and the mysteries of the cosmos. The deeper you look into existence the more amazing life feels. Whether it's the mysterious makeup of atoms or galaxies, the distance between

things is so great that any coming together of matter, the dancing and busy movement that is required, speaks to us of the Creator.

But whispered invitations to join the dance were not enough for the Great Romancer who is our God. They chose instead to be with us in the form of Jesus, Emmanuel.

Much is said and much more could be said about all that God the child gave up to walk with us. But I also like to reflect on another possible motivator. God loves creation. They used to walk with us in the garden and while we often talk about or think about how paradise was lost to us because of our choices, God also lost the easy intimacy and joyful proximity to their creatures and especially to us. Incarnation, while not without suffering, also afforded another moment of intimacy, and of inhabiting this glorious house they built for us all to live in together. I mean, the world.

I like to imagine that Jesus really enjoyed his life here. Being with us, delighting in us, breaking bread and communing with us was something worth living for. People always say he loved us enough to die. But he also loved us enough to live and wants us to live fully and joyfully for his name's sake.

Another passage from *Mio, My Son*:

*Suddenly, I felt a little uneasy that my father the King wouldn't like me sitting there eating and laughing so much. Back then, I still didn't know how good my father the king was...and how much he wanted me to laugh...*

*"Laugh more!" said my father the king. Then he turned to the Master Rose Gardener and said something even more peculiar, "I enjoy the birds singing. I enjoy the music of the silver poplars. But most of all I love to hear my son laugh in the Garden of Roses." I understood then for the first time that I never needed to be afraid of my father the king, that whatever I did he would always look at me kindly...And when I understood him, I was happier than I'd ever been before in my life. I was so glad that I laughed quite hard...I laughed because it made my father the king happy."*

Why is it hard to believe it's okay to be happy, to laugh with joy? I think it has to do with still not quite understanding what it means that God is love. I know I have had to learn and am still learning how to receive love. As it says in "Nature Boy," that old Jazz standard made famous by Nat King Cole, "The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return." As babies, we come with that ability, to simply give and receive love. Then, whether gradually or rapidly, innocence is overwhelmed by experience and love with accompanying distrust. Giving and receiving love is something we all need to remember and relearn, especially as we acquire knowledge of all kinds. So, it feels right to me on many levels that magi with their wealth of wisdom would pay homage to a newborn.

Of course, there is another much more disturbing and ugly aspect to this chapter of the birth story. The joy of one birth is quickly followed by the state-sanctioned slaughter of more than a dozen innocent children. Pain, death and all kinds of injustice persist and perhaps even intensify after the birth of the Prince of Peace. Poverty, fear, narrow escapes. Mary has to consciously decide to hold on to the good moments, because she had experienced so much trauma.

It really seems that these two epiphany moments in today's Scripture readings were as much or more for the benefit of Jesus and his family as they were for others. After all, the voice from heaven, unlike the voice in the Transfiguration, didn't directly address the other people present but only the beloved

child. Can you imagine how that must have felt to the man whom everyone in his community considered a bastard, the illegitimate child of a Roman soldier, to have God publicly claim him as his own beloved son? I also think it's important that in both of today's stories, the adoration of strangers and the heavenly voice of affirmation precede any great deeds. Existence is enough for the great I am. We exist therefore we are beloved. And because we are beloved, we are also empowered to overcome temptation and grow into ourselves with confidence and integrity.

When Jesus emerged from the womb of the Jordan River, God could not keep quiet or contain their joy and pride. It was a multisensory God moment for the Chosen One: the sensation of water on skin, the fluttering wings and startling descent of the dove, the voice from heaven, and that sky! The sky was torn open, and what was revealed behind it? The place that is as close as breath but seemingly impossible to access, the place wherein God dwells? Did the crowd of people see what Jesus saw or something different? Embodiment. God with us. The gifts of the magi were tactile, shiny, had smells. All to later bring the holy family back to their body memories, that moment in time, and the truth of who they are.

A song I've been enjoying through this quite unusual Christmas Season is "In the Bleak Midwinter." One verse, in particular, speaks to me this year:

*Enough for him who cherubim*

*Worship night and day*

*a breastful of milk and a*

*mangerful of hay.*

*Enough for him whom angels*

*fall down before*

*the ox and ass and camel*

*which adore*

Life is dignified and affirmed so deeply by the Incarnation. How can we not be content with what we have and who we are if Christ himself chose it, embracing it and us so completely through birth and life? Because of this choice, the church also should be able to walk and work with joy and pride in its very human and very godly identity as the incarnate and continually reborn Body of Christ.

This brings me to the question of gifts. The magi didn't arrive empty handed, did they? I remember a really silly episode of the TV show *The Simpsons* that aired several years ago. It was a riff off of the short story "Gifts of the Magi" by O Henry. In it, Marge and Homer are about to open their presents on Christmas morning and Homer panics, realizing that he forgot to buy a present for his wife. So, wracked with guilt, he opens the present from her. Inside it, he finds a present for Marge from him. He is overwhelmed with love and gratitude as he says "You know me so well!" God knows that there is nothing we all want more than to have a special gift to give to our beloved heavenly parent to celebrate and uplift, to bring glory to them and delight their hearts. So, knowing us so well, they gifted all of us with all we need in order to do just that and do it together. Namely, faith and love. Add to that the best of thousands of years of tradition and modelling. All we are and do together will be our gift to future generations of Christ followers that they can continue to offer to God. May we keep offering ourselves

unselfconsciously and joyfully with gifts of all kinds, but most of all, our laughing, loving hearts. Because our joy, love and compassion are as good as a skyful of stars or angels to announce and celebrate the presence of Emmanuel, God with us. And who knows who might at any time undertake a journey to us, or what impact their journey and arrival might have on all of our lives?