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“God Made Manifest”

A blessed Epiphany to you all!

Epiphany, the 6th of January, marks the end of Christmas – the *twelve* days of Christmas, that is – and celebrates the day when the three wise men, the “Magi” as Matthew’s story tells us, arrived in Bethlehem to pay their respects to the newly born king

Many pageants and nativity scenes would have you believe that the three kings showed up right on the heels of the shepherds, but no – their journey following a star took them first to Jerusalem where they encountered the political King of the Jews, Herod, who pointed them to Bethlehem – the prophesied location of the new king’s birth

Their visit holds great significance in the story of Jesus’ birth because these were not three Jewish priests or prophets who came to confirm that Jesus was indeed the Messiah that had been promised – but rather, the Magi are three outsiders, likely Zoroastrians – a tradition coming out of ancient Persia – who studied the stars, the cosmos, and saw significance in the constellations

Epiphany, which translated from Greek means “manifestation,” is the day three outsiders came and affirmed the significance of the birth of that baby born to Mary by offering great gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh – it is the day that Jesus was confirmed as the manifestation of God by the blessing of these Persian wise men

Many of us in the United States allow January 6th to pass without thought of our blessed Jesus – other, more recent, events now take up our communal narrative of that day or it passes with little acknowledgement whatsoever

But this is not so in many other countries and many other cultures - even within the United States

When I lived in California for seminary, I was in Los Angeles over Epiphany and celebrated Dia de los Reyes, or Three Kings Day, with my Salvadoran-American hosts which is celebrated in a manner very similarly to how people in Mexico and other Central American countries honor and celebrate the day which was by cutting into a Rosca de Reyesis, a circular shaped bread with dried fruits on top, and much to my surprise when it was my turn to cut the bread, I cut right into a small plastic baby

I was told this meant I was responsible for bringing the tamales to the Candelmas service on February 2nd – unfortunately, I was already back in Berkeley for my next semester of seminary for the Candelmas service

King cakes, which is another translation for Rosca de Reyes, are also quite popular this time of year in New Orleans – Epiphany is the start of the Mardi Gras season in New Orleans

You may have thought it was just one day – Fat Tuesday – before Ash Wednesday, but why be one day when you can have a whole month!

There are plastic babies – by the way representing the one whom the Kings confirmed, Jesus! – in the New Orleans cakes too, and I've heard that slicing into those babies means good luck – and that you're responsible for buying the next king's cake

It was when I was living in Germany as a student studying abroad that I first saw the chalk marks over peoples' doors

At first I had no idea what it was – “20 * C + M + B + 06”

Of course, the markings over the doors this year would read: “20 * C + M + B + 23”

The first and last numbers being the year “2023” the “*” symbolizing the star over Bethlehem that guided the Kings, the “+” representing the cross of Christ, and “C M B” representing the names given to the three Magi - Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar.

It's a tradition that is not unique to Germany, but quite common there, that symbolizes the visit of the three kings – it is a blessing on that house, the idea that the Kings came and found Christ present in that home, or a blessing in the sense of offering Christ to those living in the home

An outward symbol of an inward blessing, a visual representation of an inner manifestation

The wise men come to recognize not just the manifestation of Immanuel, “God with us,” 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, but Immanuel, “God with us” 2,000 years later – in our homes, in our churches, in our selves

One of my classmates from seminary who now is a Senior Research Associate of the Religion & Society Program at the Aspen Institute, Tuhina Rasche, recently posted on social media about this tradition of marking the door frames at Epiphany to bless homes

And, she went on to say: Epiphany “is also a time to bless the dwelling places in which God resides, our very bodies. Remember,” she writes, “on this Epiphany and every day after, you are a blessed being where God resides.”

Remember, you are a blessed being where God resides.

YOU are a blessed being where God resides

I’ve seen homes marked with the “20 * C + M + B + 23”

I’ve seen churches marked with the same writing

I’ve never seen anyone write it on their forehead, but wow – after Tuhina’s message I wonder if we should

An outward symbol of an inward blessing, a visual representation of an inner manifestation

You are a blessed being where God resides

Tuhina’s message popped up on my Instagram feed amidst all of the New Year’s gym, diets, and “new year - new you” advertisements that bombard and overwhelm our media this time of year

I wonder if this is why Tuhina’s message jumped out at me so vividly – because it seems to offer a message so opposite of what all of those advertisements say

In the midst of ad campaigns that are designed to sell you on you not being good enough as you are – be thinner, be happier, be healthier, be better – Tuhina reminds us: You are a blessed being where God resides – as you are

I have fallen victim to the New Year’s advertisement scheme for most of my life – not just at the new year, but especially tenderly then, too – believing I was not, am no, good enough as I am – that if only I were thinner I might be happier, if only I were...fill in the blank...I would be better

Better at what? Who knows, better in general – I don't know, it's not real, but I have believed it – it's not real, it's not real

I am a blessed being where God resides

You are a blessed being where God resides

A baby boy all those years ago recognized by three outsiders as the manifestation of God – all that is holy, all that is good, all that is kind, all that is gracious, all that is merciful – embodied in Jesus, went on to live a life and ministry whose purpose was to re-make whole the brokenness of humankind – individually and communally – and sought to tear down the tools of the empire, the tools of society, that broke us apart individually and communally

Tuhina's reflection reminds us that that same God – all that is holy, all that is good, all that is kind, all that is gracious, all that is merciful – and God's beloved child, Jesus, who seeks your wholeness not brokenness, resides in you and me, too

We may not have "20 * C + M + B + 23" marked on our heads but we were marked with the sign of the cross at our baptisms and that is enough

We don't need to be or do anything more than simply be ourselves, and to God we are beautiful, we are outstanding, we are God's love incarnate

May the gift of the Three Kings – the gift of knowing and embodying the manifestation of the radical love of God in our hearts, minds, bodies, and communities – hold us and transform us this Epiphany. Amen.