

JANUARY 4, 2015: EPIPHANY
Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2:1-12

Through the centuries, most Christians have become more comfortable with St Bonaventure's appraisal of God working in our lives than our biblical authors' appraisal. The former coined the oft-repeated Latin statement, "*Potuit, deuit, ergo fecit.*" In English, "God could do it. It would make sense for God to do it. Therefore God does it." Such reasoning is frequently employed when dealing with the Virgin Mary. God, for instance, could create the most beautiful woman on earth. Wouldn't it be fitting for his/her Son's mother to be the most beautiful woman on earth? Therefore, Mary was the most beautiful woman on earth.

Our sacred authors rarely follow that reasoning. If they'd made a statement to parallel Bonaventure's, it would have read: "*Potuit, deuit, sed nunquam fecit.*" "God could do it. It would make sense for God to do it. But God never does it that way."

God's unpredictable behavior is one of the reasons we have such a thick Bible. God makes a habit of acting in ways no one could have anticipated. For instance, if God only did what made sense, we certainly wouldn't have today's feast of the Epiphany.

Writing for a Jewish/Christian community in the late 70's, Matthew is forced to deal with the unforeseen entry of large numbers of non-Jews into Christianity. Jesus' original disciples had presumed only Jews would follow this carpenter from Capernaum. After all, no one regarded him as the founder of a new religion; he was simply a prophetic reformer of Judaism. Why would Gentiles be interested in imitating this radical Jew?

At first, when non-Jews showed an interest in becoming other Christs, among other things, they were obligated to imitate the historical Jesus' Jewishness. Before they could convert to Christianity they first had to convert to Judaism. But when people like Paul began more deeply to understand the implications of the risen, not the historical Jesus among us, most church leaders dropped the requirement that non-Jewish converts become Jews. After all, as Paul reminded the Galatians in chapter 3, the risen Jesus is a new creation - neither slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female.

Though Matthew's church seems to have generally accepted this reality, the evangelist still thinks it's necessary to include a handful of occasions in his gospel when the faith of Gentiles trumped the faith of Jews. Today's magi pericope is the first of those occasions.

Matthew's magi certainly aren't kings; they're astrologers, relating to God in a way our sacred authors constantly condemn: they follow stars. According to the 613 laws of Moses, such individuals are to be killed on sight. Yet here, employing their forbidden methods, these gift-bearing Gentiles discover the new-born King of the Jews, while their bible-quoting contemporaries - Herod's "wise men" - never leave Jerusalem and go just a few miles down the road to Bethlehem. No one in Matthew's original community would have missed the point. It's an understatement to say God works in strange ways.

Third-Isaiah was aware of God's erratic behavior when he spoke about Gentiles one day flocking to Jerusalem to praise Yahweh. Just a generation after the Babylonian Exile, he was convinced that "nations (non-Jews) shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance."

The disciple of Paul who wrote Ephesians was certain that having an insight about non-Jews playing an essential role in Yahweh's salvation was one of the perks of being a Christian. This was "the mystery . . . made known . . . by revelation. Not made known to people in other generations."

All three of today's readings imply that discovering God's "non-fitting" actions is an ongoing process. Should we then be adding books to our Bible? Today's Hebrew and Christian Scriptures might just be too small of a collection.

JANUARY 11, 2015: BAPTISM OF JESUS
Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Acts 10:34-38 Mark 1:7-11

When most of us hear the word “annunciation,” we immediately think of Gabriel’s unique encounter with Mary in Luke 1. Those more familiar with Scripture would add Joseph’s angelic dream in Matthew 1. But only the most biblically sophisticated would turn to today’s gospel pericope describing Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist.

Given our Christian background, we can see why Mary and Joseph need to be informed about their role in salvation history. But given that same Christian background, we can’t understand why Jesus needs an annunciation. He’s God from all eternity; the second person of the Trinity. If he doesn’t know what his role is in salvation history, we’re all in trouble.

Of course, it’s easy to forget that much of our personal Christian background came from catechisms, not Scripture. We learned about our faith in the context of a question/answer format; not from biblical narratives and letters. Coming from a Greek thinking mindset, we were expected to analyze people and situations around us, always trying to reach an either/or conclusion about them.

We ignore the fact that our sacred authors lived and expressed themselves in a Semitic, not a Greek thinking world. Instead of intellectually tearing people and situations apart with analysis, they synthesized, looking at them from every possible angle, continually surfacing different (sometimes contradictory) aspects. Like Fiddler on the Roof’s Tevye, their favorite line was, “But on the other hand . . .” When they finally finished thinking, they always couched their conclusions in a both/and, not an either/or statement. Unlike modern, Greek thinking Christians, they didn’t hesitate to give differing theological opinions about the same person or situation.

This is especially true when it comes to what the late Fr. Raymond Brown in his classic book, *The Birth of the Messiah*, referred to as the “Christological moment:” at what point in his existence does Jesus become God? The answer varies from Paul’s belief in Romans 1 that it happened at his resurrection to John’s conviction that he was God from all eternity.

In today’s Marcan pericope, the Christological moment either takes place at Jesus’ baptism, or the Father makes him aware of who he is at that event. (That could be why there’s no Infancy Narrative in Mark. The evangelist probably didn’t believe Jesus was God during that part of his existence.) Notice that, unlike the voice from heaven during Jesus’ transfiguration which announces, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!” the baptismal voice proclaims, “You are my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased.” Here the heavenly voice is announcing something to Jesus, not to his disciples.

Considering the Baptizer’s baptism revolved around someone’s determination to give himself or herself completely to Yahweh, this would be a turning point in the Galilean carpenter’s life. And, according to Mark’s theology, it’s in his total giving of himself that Jesus both discovers who he is, and his role in God’s plan of salvation.

From Luke’s mention in Acts that Jesus’ public ministry began only after “the baptism that John preached,” we can be fairly certain that event historically triggered something in Jesus that wasn’t there before. Like Deutero-Isaiah in today’s first reading, he’s now determined to be Yahweh’s special servant, to bring God’s consoling word to all who will listen.

Some of us might still be wandering around, not quite certain what God has in mind for us. Perhaps we’ve yet to give ourselves over completely to the risen Jesus, present and working in our daily lives. The historical Jesus would be the first to tell us, “Let go! Take that step!” It’ll be interesting to reflect on what we discover about ourselves when we finally make that decision. Bet we surface lots of “both/ands.”