

Epiphany – January 6, 2019  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
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*You're a mean one, Mister Grinch, and you really are a heel...*

I've spent some time this past week watching my favorite Christmas shows from childhood. And I noticed that when it comes to most of my favorite Christmas movies or TV shows, there's almost always a happy ending!

Take, for instance, *The Grinch*: "The Grinch hated Christmas, the whole Christmas season. Now please don't ask why, no one quite knows the reason."

He goes down to Whoville and steals everything. He takes everything to the top of Mt. Krumpet. And what happens next? "Well in Whoville they say the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day."

The Grinch carves the roast beast. The story has a happy ending.

In "It's a Wonderful Life," Jimmy Stewart's character wants to jump off a bridge. By the end of the story, he is asking his guardian angel to save him. "Clarence. Help me Clarence. I want to live."

Rudolph is bullied by the other reindeer because his nose is different. By the end of the story, he is the hero.

Charlie Brown buys the ugliest tree possible. In the end, everybody loves him.

Our favorite Christmas stories have happy endings.

Today, we hear Matthew's account of the visit of the Magi. And you may have concluded that, even in the Gospels, the Christmas stories have happy endings.

We celebrate the Epiphany. We're inspired by the Magi. The Magi have a certain wisdom – we don't call them 'the wise men' for nothing (even though the bible never actually says that they were men... I have heard reports that women can be wise too!).

These Magi were wise enough to notice what was happening in the heavens. Apparently, not everyone was paying attention. As Matthew tells the story, it is only these wisdom figures from an Eastern land who paid attention to the star which announced that God was up to something

big.

So they undertake the hard journey, not quite sure where they will end up.

And when they arrive, they worship him, and present their gifts. Then they go home by another route, so that King Herod won't know all the details. It is a lovely story, about people smart enough to pay attention. People willing to go on the journey. People whose generosity inspires us to give gifts at Christmas. People smart enough to take the safe route home. Matthew's Christmas story has a happy ending.

Or, *does it?*

True, the part of Matthew's Christmas story that I read to you today *does* have a happy ending. But that is not the end of Matthew's narrative!

Remember, Matthew says that the Magi started their journey because they saw the star. As long as they kept their eye on the star, they knew the way.

Then, an odd thing happens. For some reason, the Magi take their eyes off the star, and pay a visit to King Herod, the nasty king who rules Israel.

Matthew mentions that the Magi walk in to Herod's palace and ask, "Hey, where is the newborn king of the Jews?"

Sounds like a simple question. But – why do they have to ask it? The star has been leading them for hundreds of miles. How did they lose sight of it? Did they take their eyes off of it? Matthew doesn't tell us. But they've gotten lost, and have to stop for directions!

Which leads to a deeper tragedy. When they ask King Herod their question, they tip him off to something he wasn't aware of.

Apparently, Herod and his advisors had not paid attention to the star announcing the arrival of the newborn king. It's the Magi who tell Herod what he didn't know – that Christ has been born.

When the Magi go home, Herod flies into a jealous, angry, violent rage. And Herod decides – much like the purveyors of death at Planned Parenthood clinics – that children must die so that he can keep living the kind of life he wants to live.

When the Magi depart from the infant Jesus, you might think that we have come to the beautiful ending of the beautiful story. But as soon as the Magi go home, St. Joseph receives a warning in

a dream. “Take Mary and Jesus, and flee to Egypt at once. Herod wants to kill him.”

Herod sends soldiers to Bethlehem, and they slaughter every child under the age of two. There is wailing in the streets, heartbreak for parents. This all happens in the 5 verses after the Magi leave.

Sure, the Magi have their happy ending – they went home by another route, with happy memories of the Christ child. But back in Bethlehem, there are families whose children’s lives been taken by Herod’s troops. All because the Magi had unwittingly alerted Herod to the birth of Jesus.

*How’s that* for a Christmas story? A story which ends with Jesus, Mary and Joseph as refugees from violence in Egypt; grieving families in Bethlehem; a king on a violent rampage; and some foreign wise guys who are headed home...

Why doesn’t Matthew’s Christmas story give us a Hallmark happy ending? Well, perhaps Matthew is telling us something we need to remember: the child born in Bethlehem came to love and serve and save *everyone*.

Yes, he came to love and serve and save people like the Magi – people with some wisdom. People with the ability to make a long trip and buy a nice present. Jesus came to love and save people whose lives seem to go smoothly and have good outcomes.

And, the child born in Bethlehem came to love and serve and save people like... the families in Bethlehem. The moms and dads whose hearts got broken. Jesus came to love and save those who die too young, those who die from violence, those who are victims of repression and jealousy and hate.

And, the child born in Bethlehem came to love and serve and save families: families like his own family... who have to deal with imperfect situations, or terrifying moments. He came to love and save families who have to flee one country in order to seek safety in another. He came to love and save imperfect families.

And, the child born in Bethlehem came to love and save every person who ever feels as if their wonderful plans and dreams have been snatched away from them by a situation that is unfair, unjust or downright scary.

The child of Bethlehem comes to every one of us in our hours of darkness, struggle, disappointment, embarrassment, and fear... he comes to us, to love us and guide us by his perfect light. To teach us how to love others who are struggling or afraid.

If the perfect Son of God were born into a perfect family, in a perfect way in a perfect town, then his message would probably only apply to ... perfect people.

But the Son of God was born in a stable, with animal dust in the air and the odor of shepherds at the door.

The Son of God had to be hidden in a foreign country, because that's where his family could find safety. Meanwhile, other families in Bethlehem wept.

This story about the birth of Jesus reveals that God is present, here and now. Yes, he is present in all that is beautiful in your life. But the savior is also present in every aspect of your life, and our world, that is struggling, suffering, staggering, screaming, streaming with tears.

And Christ is present in the children who are being baptized today. Christ is present in their families. And it is our privilege to share faith with them, the faith which tells them that Christ is always with them, when the story of their life is going happily, and when the story of their life is full of struggles.

Sometimes life feels dark. But Christ's light shines in the darkness, like the star of wonder. So, keep your eye on the light, and keep singing:

*Star of wonder, star of night,  
Guide us to the perfect light.*