

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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And so there was the newborn baby, there in the cold winter night where it seemed he didn't belong. Many people were nearby, carrying on with their daily activities, but almost nobody knew he was right there, waiting to be discovered. The people to whom this child had been sent were either too afraid to welcome him or too troubled by the demands that they knew would be placed upon them by his birth. But a few people did notice him, and although they were not members of his family lineage, they welcomed him, and brought gifts to his crib, and loved him. They were filled with joy and amazement for such a miracle.

And of course, this is not the story of Jesus and the Magi. It is the story of Nathan, the newborn child who was abandoned in the foyer of the St. Paul Cathedral this week, and of the custodian, and the pastor, and the police, and the EMTs and the pediatric medical staff at Children's Hospital, all of whom helped save Nathan's life. And just like the story of Jesus, this is one that begins with the simple act of noticing. The custodian noticed a container that seemed out of place by the door, and he almost walked right on by. The Magi noticed a star—one single star among all the others in the night sky, one that they had ever seen before, that seemed out of place. The custodian heard the faintest whimper of a child trying to say, "Here I am!" The Magi saw one star out of millions, the one belonging to the newborn King of the Jews, announcing, "Here I am!" (The Sacred Scriptures never say this star was the gigantic one.)

In both stories, one only becomes involved with them by noticing things that most other busy, distracted, indifferent people can't see or hear, or choose not to. The very same star that guided the Magi from faraway lands was shining in the sky over Jerusalem, too—yet not a single citizen there noticed it, nor did the king. If the foreigners hadn't alerted them all, the child Jesus would have been completely ignored. That seems to be the usual way that Jesus comes into the world—in what is small, and weak, and available for anyone to see and welcome, but also capable of being passed over—or even rejected—by people and communities who are blind or insensitive to what is going on. The Magi noticed the star because they were experienced in looking and noticing things up there. The King of Israel, Herod, wasn't looking for anything. As far as he was concerned, there already was a king on the throne in Jerusalem, and he was it. It's easy not to notice things you aren't seeking, and sometimes it is the foreigners among us who are the first to point out what we aren't paying attention to. The Magi were the foreigners. Thankfully back then there wasn't a wall surrounding the town of Bethlehem. There is today. The Magi couldn't have gotten to the Manger in 2017.

So how might we cultivate the virtue of noticing things, and of finding within what looks weak and small the very presence of Almighty God? It begins by attending daily to people and things that are weak and small and easily overlooked. By doing that as a habit of life every day. And it continues with prayer, constant prayer, so that when the face of Jesus shows itself we will recognize it for what it truly is, whether in a whimper or in a star, or in a human being in whom others see only failure or shame. And it happens by being exceptional in our willingness to welcome and listen to people who aren't just like us, in culture, race, religion, political disposition, age, socio-economic status or life experience. We'll never notice if we don't hear or see.

This Feast of Epiphany reminds us that what God gave to us in Jesus at Christmas he also gave to the whole world, to any who would notice, so that there is no place and nobody where the presence of God on earth might not be discovered—for those who are committed to looking for it.

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In the first two hours of his life on earth, baby Nathan at the Cathedral changed the lives of others forever and made headlines in the newspapers—and nobody even knew who he was or from whom he came. (Jesus did that, too.) But Nathan was received by all kinds of people who noticed, and who knew that if there's ever an eruption of Jesus into this world, it is surely in an infant who is at risk of freezing in a Minnesota winter night...in what is small and vulnerable. May we pray in this Eucharist for the gift of noticing, and the resolve to look for the face of Jesus *wherever* God may choose to reveal it to us, and then to respond with the same compassion that Nathan was shown this week, for the sake of being faithful to our Christian call.