

Fr. Tim Clancy  
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## Epiphany

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany when magi from the East come to offer gifts to the newborn Christ child. Who were these magi? Our opening song depicts them as Kings. Sometimes they are called wise men. Sometimes astrologers. And then, magi is the root of our word magician.

All of these terms refer to religious figures who lived in tune with the world around them. Magicians are able to harness the forces of nature to perform miracles. Astrologers read the heavens to forecast human destinies. Wise men discern the way of all things and advise accordingly. And good kings govern in a way that promotes social harmony and cultivates the flourishing of their subjects.

Too often we pit nature and humanity against one another. In the ancient world nature was a chaotic force, a dangerous beast. In fact the Greeks compared reason to a boat on the open sea. By human cunning we could sail from one point of land to another. But the journey was precarious. Storms could come out of nowhere. Ships often sunk or were blown off course and lost at sea.. They would thus usually hug the coast. Spending a night at sea was risky in days without compasses. If night clouds hid the stars, they would have nothing to guide them. Paul claimed to have been shipwrecked three times. I suspect that was not because he was unlucky. It was because he travelled a lot at sea.

Today the situation is inverted. Humanity with its technology is now thought to be more powerful than nature. Nature is now the vulnerable one. Scientists are even beginning to talk of a new geological age, the Anthropocene, in recognition of the fact that humanity has transformed the earth in the service of human flourishing, often at the expense of all other terrestrial life forms. Those species that flourish today are those that have allied themselves with us, like dogs and cats, corn and cows. These are dominant species even though none of them could now survive for long without human care and cultivation.

But before the industrial revolution *nature* was the overwhelmingly powerful force, that could devastate us even by accident, the dominant force on the planet that humans were wise to work with it rather than defy it. And so the ancient association of magicians and astrologers with wise men and kings. But today its humanity who could wipe out nature by accident, either through nuclear war or global warming, we worry of destroying nature, turning our home into a

wasteland. This is so much so that when nature does regain the upper hand and strikes back we are disoriented and traumatized. Earthquakes, epidemics, thunderstorms and firestorms-- these used to bring people to religion, praying to God to control nature=s arbitrary whims. Now these disasters undermine religious faith. How could there be a good God if nature can be so out of our control?

But with global warming, we are learning that as powerful as we are over nature, that we still need to respect its power and work with it not in defiance of it. That as powerful as we are we must stay in tune with nature. And so Pope Francis has extended Catholic spirituality beyond faith and justice to include ecology, care for what is after all our common home.

The three are interdependent and synergistic. Faith must include not only include faith in God and faith in one another, but faith in the natural world, that it is not simply raw material or our own private property to dispose of as we please. We must respect nature as having inherent value in its own right, even independent of its economic value to us. We must honor *it* and do *it* homage. And while we can tend to pit benefits to nature against cost to humans, ultimately caring for the earth is not in conflict with caring for the poor, for the costs of pollution are usually borne by the poor. Spokane is not going to dump or burn its waste on the South Hill. This really came home to me when I saw pictures of Manoj=s home town of Chennai. There is trash scattered everywhere, the river running through town looks like and possibly smells like a sewer.

We need to live in harmony with our world. In Jesus time, because nature was so powerful. Today because we are so powerful. But in either case, as Peter once responded to Jesus. AWhere else can we go?@ Meaning, salvation, can only transcend by redeeming this world of ours.