

## Epiphany Year C

I can't think of a better reading for Epiphany (or any other high feast) than from the great Cormac McCarthy. These are words from a sheriff of a small west Texas town describing a dream about his father:

**“And when he rode past, I seen he was carrying fire in a horn the way people used to do, and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was going on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire in all that dark and all that cold...”**

That line is from the last scene of *No Country for Old Men*, the Cohen brother's epic movie based on a novel of the same name by Cormac McCarthy. It is a tale about a drug deal gone bad along the Texas Mexico border. The protagonist is a young everyman who unwittingly gets caught up in the vast evil that is the illicit drug trade and the violence it engenders in our world....an evil that pervades just who knows where and just how far. It seems I saw this movie just a few years ago; but it's been ten. It was a cold late December evening. There were only four or five of us in the theatre. You know how it is when you leave a movie theatre: The movie has transported you into the alchemical world of the artifice; your imagination has been given over to the charge of another, and then, upon leaving, one must re-assemble one's wits and re-enter the cold, dark and flat reality of a Monday evening, or a Tuesday...one's heart still pounding with the lavish memory of the experience....like waking from a poignant dream.

As we were pulling out of our parking space amid the garish neon light of the Jubilee Shopping center, I recognized the young man next to us as one of the few who had just seen the movie. In my evangelical zeal for Cormac McCarthy I rolled down the window and asked him why he'd come; and in a South Alabama drawl he said: "Well I heard it was a pretty good flick..." I don't know what I had expected....something like: "Well I wanted to experience the contemporary mythic voice of the American soul..." but that is not what he said....and just before I could say goodnight, his eyes arrested mine....eyes aflame....and he asked in all earnestness....

"Sir...What did it mean?"

I thought for a few seconds there at the eastern shore Rave sixteen multiplex after dark, and I said, "I don't know for sure what it means, my head still spinning...; One has to let the experience settle and ripen.... that's the way art is" I said....His attention was still rapt; I couldn't end there....

"But one theme, I said, consistent in McCarthy, is the placing into poetic contrast the overwhelming evil of our world up and against the faint, fragile but sure goodness that a few are called to bear....He was listening.... I continued "A pin-point of light seemingly overmatched up and against a vast and conspiring darkness." He nodded and thanked me, and we headed our respective ways back into the dark solstice of a cold night in December.

Indeed the scene set by the writer of Matthew in our reading today is much the same: A dark night in a dark time. This birth of the heir of David, the one in the line of Moses, the progeny of Abraham, the very son of God...this birth is set in the context of Empire; in the context of tyrannical occupation. This revelation, this Epiphany of epiphanies is set up and against power gone wrong..... We have so romanticized this passage: worshipping kings bearing gifts, and happy shepherds, but the energy of it is clearly centered on a present danger....Matthew again in touch with the pattern of scripture...Isaiah foretelling of looming darkness and the coming exile of Israel to Babylon; like the repression of the Pharaoh of Egypt in Israel's history some thousand years before, Herod, the infanticidal client king working for the Romans, plots to murder this child of promise in order that his own power would never be challenged or compromised. The scribes and Pharisees throughout this Gospel are in league with their oppressors to protect their own positions of power and social standing. This birth, this pinpoint of life emerges amid a vast and conspiratorial darkness. And we know, as Matthew foretells, that this darkness will catch up with Jesus; Herod's murderous designs fulfilled posthumously with Jesus' brutal torture and death by crucifixion at the hands of the powers that be. So with the full knowledge of hindsight and the present day of intractable darkness, Matthew

dares to ask the question, “What does this birth mean?” And is there yet hope? That’s our question too, if we are paying attention.

So the scene, the scene recurrent throughout human history is set.... A warm and joyful flicker of light up and against the dark....singing shepherds, a live birth full of promise...the peculiar Magi (not kings as the tradition has made them) but Astrologers who historians say had fallen out of favor with the royal courts of the east in the first century....empire turning a deaf ear to those who would speak the truth of the stars in the royal courts....they are in essence out of work philosophers....but searching still, on a quest, eyes aflame....pilgrims after the mystery that is the light of the world...the star, the talisman of the truth they seek...What does it all mean? they ask...and is there yet hope in the dark?....They are led away from the palaces of power, no longer welcome... they are led to the margins of civilization; to the lonely hill country of Judea...led into the midst of outcast shepherds and farm animals.... Into the cold flat reality of everyday existence, their hearts beating with joy as if in a waking dream; and there they see the light of the universe, a pin-point of light amid the dispossession of a darkening world.

So Matthew is holding up for us two kingdoms: two kingdoms between which we must choose. Which kingdom will shape and define us? Which kingdom will shape and define our world? The kingdom of power; or

the kingdom of vulnerability....On the one hand the corrupt and murderous kingdom of empire; and on the other the compassionate community of faith which was as countercultural then as it is now. Perhaps the dramatic apex of this story is that the Magi reject the tyranny of Herod, the tyranny of Empire, and choose the possibility of Love....For the remainder of this Gospel, Matthew will speak of the meaning of this kingdom, what this kingdom looks like; the kingdom of God, embodied in this fragile and vulnerable child. This kingdom not of what we call the *world*.... A kingdom of justice and vulnerability, and sacrifice, and mutual concern, and shared abundance; a kingdom that the world beholds as weak. This kingdom has no home among the grand palaces of power, but among the rough and lost places...It is but a pin-point of light, a tenuous flame, guttering against the winds of evil...but aflame nonetheless... and persistent.... And still aflame today sending good news into the fearful darkness.

The writer of the Gospel of John tells us in the prologue that we read last week that the Christ, the true Word, is the light of the world, and that that light is the light of humankind. It is high time that we owned that and get on with the mission for which we were born. At the birth of Christ at the margins of existence...we are born there too....we are the ones no less than this child over whom the star descends and stops...we are sons and

daughters of God... born of this light...and it seems that we are overmatched....the evil is so pervasive and so vast....but the truth dear people of God is that this fragile and tender and tenuous light is the light of Love, and Love is so very strong; it doesn't conform to the metrics of the world; Love persists; and Love endures; and Love never dies....the Epiphany of our God is that this light is born amid the hopeless and lost corners of our world....Love is born where it is needed most... and the promise is that the dark will not overcome it... because Love is stronger.... Stronger than the dark.

Brothers and sisters, at our Baptism we were given over to the charge of another. We are citizens of the kingdom of God first and foremost. Never forget that. Our imaginations belong to a God who loves the world beyond all reckoning. As children of the light we are given over to loving the world into existence...the world still being created, continually being remade and restored, under the auspices of a pin-point of light.....a light we bear with joy... because Love has the last word when all is said and done.

As we make our way into what this all means, pilgrims on our quest, as we make our way into the mystery.....as we are "fixin to make a fire in all that dark and all that cold"... May God grant us courage, because we'll need it....know that; this ain't easy... but may our hearts beat like hearts stirred in

a dream....God's very dream for God's world....a world ordered by the goodness that we are called to bear. We are pilgrims on the most noble of journeys; and the most noble of vocations.... So, yes to God's kingdom; yes to the dream; and yes to the light....the light that will burn forever in all that cold and in all that dark.