

DISCERNING DIVINITY



IN THE TRADITIONAL Christian calendar, Christmas is followed by Epiphany, which falls on January 6th, twelve days after Christmas (hence, the twelve days of Christmas). Epiphany commemorates the recognition by the Wise Men that the baby is the promised Messiah, the Son of God. His birth fulfills prophecy that “the Lord Omnipotent . . . , who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay” (Mosiah 3:5).

What a stunning oracle—that Jehovah would dwell as Jesus in a tabernacle of clay! We sometimes forget the true wonder of Christmas, which is figured in the astonishing truth that “in the darkness of Bethlehem the omnipotent God became an impotent Baby. The hands that made the world and hung the stars in the sky were now just large enough to grasp a mother’s finger.”⁴⁰

The scriptural account of Jesus’ birth is chock full of epiphanies. The Magi were not the only ones with eyes to discern Jesus’ true identity. Simeon and Anna detected the promised Messiah in a mere infant brought to the temple. The shepherds beheld a Savior beneath simple swaddling clothes. Elizabeth and seemingly the babe in her womb recognized Jesus as the Lord even before he was born. And, of course, Joseph and Mary learned by revelation the divine identity of the baby, an angel having revealed to Joseph that

Mary was carrying the prophesied Immanuel, and to Mary that she was the promised virgin mother.

Likewise, every believer must come to recognize the Christ in a baby from Bethlehem. Sometimes we mistakenly suppose that the Savior's divinity would have been obvious to all, but this was surely not so. Jesus was not born with a nimbus. Isaiah prophesied, "And when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). Kierkegaard insisted that Jesus came to the earth "incognito" so that every believer has to learn to see the Son of God in one who appears to be merely a carpenter's son.⁴¹ Wise men and women in every age detect a King in a cradle and on a cross. We call such epiphanies the testimony of Jesus.

Christ's birth in a stable also reminds us to be alert to the divinity within the world. As Dennis Rasmussen observes in his beautiful Christmas essay "Knowest Thou the Condescension of God?":

When Jesus entered the world, all things were transformed, not because they looked different, but because he was in their midst. He knew their real worth. As an artist takes common colors and blends them into beauty, Christ took common things and raised them up to sanctity. He led men to see, as they had never seen before, the hidden holiness in the world. Leaven and salt, wind and sea, publicans and sinners—all revealed before his eyes their inner goodness.⁴²

Christmas invites us to see the "real worth," "hidden holiness," and "inner goodness" of all God's creations—particularly of our neighbors. As C. S. Lewis reminds us, "Your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses." This sentiment comes from a sermon entitled "The Weight of Glory" in which Lewis reflects on what it means to live with the "weight or burden of my neighbor's glory":

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest

and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.... There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.... It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.⁴³

Like the disciples who journeyed to Emmaus, our eyes are sometimes “holden” to the eternal identities and divine possibilities of those we rub shoulders with daily. Christ teaches us to see each other with new eyes, as did he: “He sees a brother where there was once only a slave”—“*Il voit un frère où n’était qu’un esclave.*”⁴⁴ Perhaps the gladdest tidings from Bethlehem is the joyful news that “God became man so that man might become a god.”⁴⁵ Latter-day Saints have a particularly rich understanding of the divine possibilities that the Savior makes available to all people. We of all people ought to see sons and daughters of God where others may see mere mortals.

This season reminds us that mundane, quotidian reality is suffused with glorious, eternal possibility. As faculty, we would do well to look for such possibilities. I count myself blessed to have had teachers, friends, and family who saw potential in me. As a late bloomer, my early years in school were exceedingly inauspicious. But many wise men and women saw beyond bad penmanship and spelling. They expected more, much more, of me. At BYU, we rightly expect a lot *from* each other because we expect so much *for* each other, as sons and daughters of God with glorious possible futures. Because the mission of BYU is “to assist individuals in their quest for perfection,” we need eyes to see beyond imperfection. For behold, we dwell among nascent kings and queens!