

The Church makes a big deal out of the Epiphany. It's a big deal not so much because of who the magi were, or what they brought to Jesus, or even how they got there. It's a big deal because of where they came from. They came from the Orient. They came from non-Jewish territory. Their arrival proclaimed that Jesus is Lord--not just of Bethlehem, or Judea, but Lord of the Orient, and Lord of the world.

There is a difference between Christmas and Epiphany. At Christmas God sent the Son into the world. At Epiphany the world found out. There is a difference between the news and telling the news. At Epiphany, God told the news of Christmas.

You remember the story: Three magi observe a magnificent star in the heavens. It seems to be moving purposefully toward some point. So they follow it. But they get lost. They're strong in astronomy but their geography is weak. In fact, their sense of politics is naive, too. They get as far as Jerusalem and ask around for directions to the newborn king of the Jews. Word reaches Herod, who is understandably upset about the question. Surprisingly, it's Herod who finds out the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, and Herod who steers the magi on the right road. In fairness, they weren't far off. Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem.

Epiphany was risky business for God. Sending Jesus to the world was relatively easy. Telling people about it proved risky: Sure, the shepherds rejoiced, and the magi brought gifts, but Herod convulsed. He began killing babies as a result of Christmas Day.

For all of us, there's a risk to going public with what we believe. Believing is relatively easy. We can believe in private, pray in private, and derive great satisfaction and inner peace. But when we go public we take risks: People may reject us, mock us, hurt us for our faith. Epiphany is riskier than Christmas.

The pain of going public with religion most frequently comes to my attention within families. People frequently wonder why other family members don't go to church with them, why they don't hold the same values. And it's a concern at the workplace as well--it's sometimes hard to take a stand for what one believes is right.

My point is that often having religion is a great source of comfort, but expressing it is to take a risk. So we may hesitate to pray at restaurants, or before a family meal, or to invite people to church with us. It's a risk, but it's ultimately a part of true religion. Ultimately it's a risk we take. We take it because once we have the good news it oozes out. Once there's a Christmas, there's going to be an Epiphany.

If people reject us for what we believe or don't support our religious practice, it's not that we've done something wrong. We've probably done something right. We've taken the risk of Epiphany. And that's a very big deal.