

DEEP MAGIC
Sermon for Christmas 2B—Mt 2:13-15, 19-23
LPC, 1/4/15

C. S. Lewis, in his children's book *The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe*, makes reference to the "deep magic" that underlies the magical land of Narnia. This is not a reference to magic in the conventional sense, but a reference to the order and love which is understood, in Narnia, to be the foundation of the world. On the ground in Narnia, things can get pretty fouled up. Evil may, from time to time, even appear to be getting the upper hand. But the deep magic can be appealed to in times of the most profound distress and danger. And the deep magic will ultimately prevail.

Those of us who believe that human beings were made by God, for God, in God's image, can identify with this notion of a deep magic that all of us bear within us. If God is the potter and we are the clay, God has left God's thumbprint on us. We may try to hide God's mark. We may cover it up with our plans and designs and images. God's mark is actually a very vulnerable place, so we protect it and sometimes forget it. We may only rediscover the deep magic within in us at times of distress and danger when our usual defenses prove futile. Often, at these times, we discover an enormous strength in the deep magic, ironically, at the very site of our own deepest vulnerability.

In spiritual direction, it sometimes happens that a person gets in touch with the deep magic within herself or himself. This encounter is usually accompanied by tears. These are not tears of sorrow but of deep vulnerability and even relief at finding the profound strength that lies beneath.

In using Lewis' terminology of deep magic, I want to be clear that this is not magic as we think of it in the context of entertainment. This is not prestidigitation or illusion. As a matter of fact, Lewis' deep magic is the furthest thing from illusion. It is in fact the stripping of all illusion to the underlying truth.

In daily life, most humans, including most Christians, walk around unaware of the deep magic within us, never mind the deep magic (which is, incidentally, the same deep magic) that underlies the whole universe – rocks, trees, animals and other humans. We may be unaware we carry any magic within us ... until the magic breaks through.

During this Christmas season you may have heard performances of the opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* by Giancarlo Menotti. This short work tells the story of the three magi, on their way to see the Christ Child, stopping at the home of a poor widow and her crippled son. At one point, one of the magi describes the king they are seeking to the mother:

The Child we seek doesn't need our gold. On love, on love alone He will build his Kingdom. His pierced hand will hold no scepter. His haloed head will wear no crown. His might will not be built on your toil. Swifter than lightning He will soon walk among us. He will bring us new life and receive our death, and the keys to his city belong to the poor.

The impoverished mother has never heard anything so wonderful. She does not know the ancient prophecies. She knows nothing of stars and portents. But at this description something

shifts within her, setting up the miracle that concludes the play. Her eyes shining, she sings, “For such a king I have looked all my life.” The description she’s just heard of the Christ Child has awakened the deep magic within her.

Now, individuals have found many different ways to express the deep magic. Images of the deep magic vary according to individual experience and custom.

The gospel-writer Matthew is a case in point. Matthew most likely was a Jew, writing to a church at least partly composed of Jews, and his gospel bears several distinguishing characteristics that reflect this background. The story of the wise men appears only in Matthew. We don’t hear their whole story in today’s reading, but you know it. Wise men come from the East following a star, in search of the promised Messiah. They ask King Herod of Judah for directions and on the basis of ancient prophecies are directed to Bethlehem. The wise men go to Bethlehem, find Jesus and worship him.

Meanwhile, mad, jealous Herod, threatened by the idea of a rival king, has all the baby boys massacred. Joseph, Jesus’ guardian, is warned in a dream and takes his family to Egypt to avoid this catastrophe. That’s the story we hear today.

Does this remind you of anything? Think Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew repeatedly refers explicitly to Hebrew Scriptures in his Gospel. Here he is referring implicitly to the Book of Exodus. See the parallels with the story of Moses: a cruel, crazy king murdering babies; one graced child miraculously escaping, the reference to Egypt. Matthew is clearly linking the liberator Jesus with the liberator Moses.

In other words, Matthew the Jew is tapping into what is deep magic for him, emphasizing images of danger and mad kings and a flight to Egypt, to help himself and his followers get in touch with the deep magic within them that they may resonate with this new gospel.

I have previously spoken this Christmas season about my sympathy for people attending Christmas services out of deep longing. I’ve said that longing is real and holy, even if people sometimes misguidedly attach that longing to recreating the glories of Christmas past. That longing grows out of the deep magic that was placed within each of us at birth. In a way, that longing is like the surface spring that marks the site of a deep, underground river.

The deep longing associated with Christmas connects us to the deep magic within is. In that deep longing for love and truth, that deep longing that has so many times been dashed because we have fixed it to transient loyalties, that deep longing we take great pains to hide that we may not be hurt, or worse, mocked, in that longing that terrifies us with the vulnerability it forces us to face –

In that longing is the shape of God, placed in us at creation. Into that God-shaped hole may Christ be born.