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The religious landscape of the United States has changed considerably over the past 50 years. 50 years ago most Americans would identify themselves as Protestant, Catholic or Jew. While there has been a significant increase among those who would see themselves as Muslim or Buddhist, the most significant change is among those who would consider themselves as "nones." That's not "n-u-n-s," religious women, but rather "n-o-n-e-s," those who would check off "none of the above," when asked in a survey what was their religious affiliation. These would number 1/5th of the total U.S. population, and 1/3rd of adults under the age of 30. Some of these self-described "nones" would consider themselves "agnostic" or "atheist." But the majority would say that they are "spiritual" in some vague, general way. A significant number of this group would describe themselves as "seekers." They are looking for something--not quite sure what it is, but something that will satisfy their spiritual needs.

Today's feast of the Epiphany celebrates God manifesting God's Self to the Magi, to those who come seeking. So, let us look to this story to see if there are any insights for those who have given up on institutional religion, but are still on a spiritual quest, but also for those of us who are more confident in our faith. Today's feast can be helpful to all of us, for our faith should of doubt, of being restless, of searching for something more.

The theme of St. Matthew's gospel is that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah. Here at last is God present to His people; Jesus is God's window upon the world. In Jesus, in His words, gestures and deeds, we catch a glimpse of the God we cannot see. The immensity of God's love is portrayed in this one particular life. Jesus is the epiphany of God, the total and complete manifestation of God's love in the world. The challenge for those who will meet Jesus, when grown to adulthood, will be not just to believe that He is God, but more importantly to believe that God is like Jesus, i.e., that the true nature of God does not conform to their previous notions of a Deity who is remote, judgmental, severe and harsh, but that the reality of God is disclosed in the compassion, acceptance and mercy that Jesus exhibits.

Even here at His birth as Jesus is proclaimed "Messiah," some are portrayed as rejecting Him, while others come to accept Him. Oddly enough, it is these outsiders, these pagan astrologers, who are the first to bestir themselves to seek out the newborn Savior. The astrologers recognize Him for Who He is, while the insiders, the scribes and the chief priests, those supposedly learned in the meaning of the

Scriptures, are actually living a faith so empty that they make no effort to search for the Christ-Child. And Herod, their king, feels only rage at this threat to his security. The reaction of the religious and political forces at the birth of Jesus is a preview of the reception His ministry will eventually receive. The story of these outsiders, these Magi, speaks of the insufficiency of those insiders who think they have all the answers. It speaks of the insufficiency of knowledge alone to be a fertile ground for the seeds of faith. Religious knowledge has to be accompanied by an openness to God who can still speak in new and wonderful ways.

It would be a mistake for us to think that we today are somehow immune from the errors of those who lived in time of Jesus, as if we could not fall victim to the same temptation to presume to have all the answers, religiously speaking. For the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty—the presumption that we have everything figured out and therefore don't have to take the trouble to go any further in trying to develop our faith. St. Matthew presents the Magi as models of faith, as those who keep on searching even in the midst of darkness. The Magi, with only the elusive light of the star to lead them, are like contemporary God-seekers who continue to stumble along in their religious journey, even when religious professionals sadly offer them little real guidance and direction. A mere recitation of the platitudes of religion, especially when not accompanied with the doubt, the uncertainty, the pain of human life, will not lead to genuine faith. Faith is not something to be lived on automatic-pilot, presuming we know full well our destination and the terrain we are crossing. Rather faith is a mystery that ever eludes us, that demands to be probed and explored—a faith that needs to be questioned, so that we can be on the journey that leads to God. The Magi are restless models of faith; they are the ones who continue to search, while the self-satisfied scribes and chief priests all stay at home and wait. The Magi, these outsiders, these searchers, discover God, while the insiders have only their empty rituals and their heartless conviction to console them.

Today's gospel warns us against an attitude of looking at our faith as some neat little package, as something we can keep under wraps. If faith is something we think we can possess, it may boomerang and come to appear as just a figment of our own imagination. Rather, faith is something that possesses us. The Gospel writers would have us see faith as a gift, as something that is not of our own construction, something over which we have no control, as something apart from ourselves, something that comes to us as from beyond ourselves, a revelation, as God's light breaking it in on the shadows of our world—an epiphany, a glimpse of God. Let us pray that we can remain steadfast on the journey, ready to catch the glimmers of God's light from whatever source they may appear, and willing to follow wherever they lead. For the promise is that on this journey, God will be renewing us every step of the way.