The Trouble with Epiphany:
Gift Giving as Genuflection, or the “Tebow” Factor

They set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. [Matthew 2:9b-11]

Prelude

A few nights before Christmas this last year in the little town of Bethlehem, on the occupied West Bank, the only light in the town hall came from the mayor’s office; where Elias Freij sat hunkered over the latest numbers of what was turning out to be another weak economic report on the hamlet’s tourist trade.

“The war, the whole operation in Lebanon,” Freij lamented, “means nobody wants to come to our city for Christmas.” 2011 would turn out to be the most disastrous tourist season since Israel seized the West Bank in the 1967 Middle East war.

“It’s the worst Christmas since the occupation began,” complained Nasri Hazboun, proprietor of a small 11-room hotel overlooking Manger Square. In an ironic twist to the old tale that has kept the little town on the map as a tourist destination, there’s room in the inn, but there’s no one knocking at the door.

The local merchants fared no better. They’d have been content to peddle their inexpensive souvenirs and trinkets to any takers; never mind any costlier keepsakes such as gold, frankincense or myrrh.

What do you do in a time and place when and where a holy day with a spiritual pilgrimage for some has devolved to a holiday that has subsequently become too dear a luxury and unaffordable observance. If pockets are empty and the only other light besides the Mayor’s office shining in Bethlehem is a hotel proprietor’s vacancy sign, what do we do with the old story of a gift exchange called the Epiphany?

Who will come and bend the knee before the newborn king? In contemporary terms, what does it mean to “Tebow” all over the world?
THE “TEBOW” FACTOR

By now, anyone with the faintest pulse on the American pop/sports culture knows how to “Tebow.” The Denver Broncos evangelical Christian quarterback, Tim Tebow, has made a head-bowed genuflection gesture his trademark symbol of last-minute come-from-behind victories on the gridiron.

Whatever your personal persuasion may be about it all, fans and critics alike have instigated once again the age-old debate whether or not you believe there is a causal connection between a personal relationship with a divine savior and the scoreboard of whatever game in life you’ve undertaken.

Whether it’s a prayer of praise or a plea for divine intervention, there are plenty of people who are suspicious to downright critical of anyone crossing the fine line between having a divine companion in ones life, and a professed belief in both divine intervention that seems arbitrary and capricious; as well as who gets the credit or the blame for one’s personal success or failure.

But there’s a back story to this year’s sports hero phenom that adds another dimension to all this “Tebowing,” that suggests there is another and possibly more discernible question to be asked and answered; namely, the gesture of genuflection, and the implications of such an act of subordinating oneself before someone or something. To whom or what are you prepared to bend the knee in humble praise and adoration, allegiance and obedience?

Whether or not you agree with Tim Tebow’s beliefs about what his personal savior does or doesn’t do, is not as noteworthy as what Tim himself does as a result of his literal faith stance. In this respect, there is nothing original or novel about “Tebowing.” Just take another look at the imaginary “visitation of the Magi” story. The craze is two thousand years old.

I was reminded of this when recalling the story image of the three magi in Matthew’s tale; where, upon finding the place to which a star in the heavens pointed, “they were overwhelmed with joy … knelt down and paid him homage … and offered him gifts.” (Mt.2:10) And, once relieved of their gifts, they rise again, and take a different road, presumably with lingering joy.

When viewed with stark objectivity, the revelatory event is characterized by three pagan foreigners who religiously believe a star in the night sky which they’d never noticed before holds the key to life’s mysteries; and, in dogged pursuit of such an answer, end up encountering the new Jewish messiah, depicted as a newborn infant in a cow stall in Bethlehem. Strange as all that may seem, they genuflect before him in an act of obeisance and subordination, and offer him the best earthly trinkets and treasures imaginable.
Matthew’s gospel conjured up this story as a retrospective afterthought to the evangelist’s message. But the early Jewish Christian community was very intentional about what was meant to be conveyed in this imaginary tale.

In exchange for all their trouble -- and, on behalf of the rest of us – the wise receive enlightenment. All our ideas about God, about what God is, or who God is, all our imaginings of the divine, is enfleshed in human. God’s character is expressed in the character of a human being, Jesus.

What is God’s character? Equally, who is this character, Jesus? That becomes one and the same question. So it becomes the quest, as well, and it all leads to trouble. That’s the trouble with Epiphany. The manifestation of the Jewish messiah to the wider world in such humble and seemingly powerless circumstances serves as a clear message about the radically subversive nature of this gospel; about another king who was to be ascribed the title king of kings, and lord of lords.

Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan describes Matthew’s Christmas story as an “overture,” where one hears a medley of all the different themes that will comprise the entire drama about to unfold. And central to that story is the treasonous transference of obeisance and allegiance from one king to another, from Augustus to Jesus. When the foreign “magicians,” or “wise men,” or “astrologers” show up in Jerusalem and ask Herod where the “King of the Jews” whose star has just been noticed in the heavens can be found among the earthly realms, it is not taken by the power elite to be simply benign curiosity. As Crossan reminds us, the next time the title “King of the Jews” appears in Matthew is on a Roman cross.

The transaction involved in the act of genuflection, however, is not simply about who you believe to be your lord and king. It has to do with what you do as a consequence of shifting your loyalty from one lord and master of your life to another. It’s not just about what you get, but what you give. In this sense, the holiday season that has just concluded, with the observance of – to use the theological terms of incarnation and epiphany – is all about the exchange of gifts and a season of giving. So what do you get for what you give, if you dare to bend the knee and “Tebow?”

Typically, by the time the 12 Days of Christmastide have come to an end, the gift-giving season is history (and the Broncos season may not be far behind). Even the billions of dollars in returns and exchanges have been calculated to give retailers the net results. It’s all based on a pretty simple economic theory. The more we spend and lavish each other with things, the better off we’ll be; and the reverse is equally true.

For some unknown reason, in the midst of the last holiday shopping season, our household received in the mail a very slick catalog of high-end merchandise offered by advertisers of exclusive shops across the country. On the catalog’s otherwise plain white cover were three simple words that could roll off the tongue like a mantra of what anyone could deem to be a good life: “Live, Love, Lavish,” it read. And the merchandise peddled in page after page promised something that was nothing short of a transformative, spiritual experience.

One shiny luxury automobile was displayed with the tagline, “The Best Reason to be Good This year,” while another posh vehicle promised the “Experience of Good Karma.” Women’s metallic calfskin sling back shoes priced at a mere $650 were offered for the “Glimmer Goddess” on your shopping list.
And a sparkling clutch purse for only $395 was available to hold “Gilded Treasures” with “criminally hot embellishments for the holidays.”

On the back cover, one jeweler who has little shops in Greenwich, Vail and Palm Beach simply had a picture of himself, bedecked with loads of lady’s necklaces and bracelets. Like a friend you could trust with your darkest fears, his comforting words of assurance ran, “Tony Betteridge rubs every piece of jewelry on his tie. If it catches a thread, it goes back to the workshop.” Whew.

If, like me and my circumstances, you find you’re not in a financial position to indulge in such ecstatic pursuits to give and get such lavish gifts of living and loving, you could have considered doing what the up and coming bourgeoisie in China have come up with. Renowned for making knock-offs of fake luxury goods, the Chinese Daily newspaper reports shoppers there are now buying imitation paper bags emblazoned with famous brands like Louis Vuitton and Chanel. The bags that can be purchased online for less than a dollar at least give the appearance they can afford the best of what life has to offer.

If all this seems a bit off the mark consider once again the most worthy object of your praise and worship, the original gift exchange and “Tebow” factor. Consider the implications not simply of pledging one’s allegiance to one’s ultimate value, but making a gift of one’s self to make a real and tangible gift offering.

Recently, the sports pages were all confounded when Manti Te’o, the star Notre Dame linebacker had the chance to leave school at the end of his junior year and go pro ball in the NFL. When he decided to turn down the opportunity and return for his senior year, Manti told reporters his kid sister BrieAnne had asked him “But wasn’t it your dream to go to the NFL?” and he said it got him thinking.

He thought about the game, and also about his academic career. But he also considered the volunteer work he’d done at Shriners Hospital, a Head Start preschool program, the Hawaii Food Bank and the Special Olympics program, and came to his decision.

“The NFL is my goal, not my dream,” he said. “My dream is to have an impact on people. I think I'm doing that, and I'm not finished yet. All the trips to the pediatric hospital, to the Homeless Center. I'm not done yet.”

It reminded me of a closing line I’d read in an imaginary tale about a wise man finding and choosing the One among many choices to whom – in real life -- he would bend the knee and offer more than his talents and his treasure.

“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” [Mt.2:12]