

CHRISTMAS ISN'T OVER!

(01/06/19)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

“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 12:11)

Darlene and I are going to leave our Christmas decorations up a little longer this year. I know it says in the Bible that you're supposed to take them down on Epiphany or “Little Christmas” (which is January 6, twelve days after Christmas), but this year I'd like to leave them up a little longer. I enjoyed having a breather (no pun intended concerning my bout with bronchitis between Christmas and New Year's) to sit with the lights on the Christmas tree filling our living room. I think I'd like to stretch Christmas out a little longer this year.

That's one of the reasons why I like to leave the Christmas tree, the creche, and the Advent wreath in our sanctuary in place until after Epiphany Sunday. Our sanctuary, thanks to David Sickles whose artistic touch as well as musical talent we are already beginning to miss, is absolutely beautiful! Being here this morning helps us to enter into or retain the Christmas spirit, and to open our hearts to the true experience of worship.

Just when the presents have been put away or returned to the stores, when the guests have dispersed to their homes and the hectic pace has finally wound down, just when it seems that the Christmas season has finally come to an end--along comes yet another part of the Christmas story! Along comes Epiphany, a reminder that Christmas isn't over. Along comes Epiphany with its reminder that the joy and the work of Christmas should never be over!

Epiphany Sunday is the Sunday immediately preceding the liturgical celebration of Epiphany. Today, however is not only Epiphany Sunday; it is actually Epiphany. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning “manifestation,” “appearance,” or “to show forth.” An epiphany is like a religious experience, or a deep, meaningful realization.

In the first few centuries of the Christian church, Epiphany was celebrated in honor of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. During that event, which we celebrate next Sunday, the Holy Spirit descended from heaven like a dove and a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son.” The Holy Spirit became “manifest” in Jesus or shone forth through Jesus. Epiphany later became the celebration of two miracles: Jesus' changing of the water to

wine at the wedding he attended at Cana, and the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. Still later it included the visit of the Wise Men shortly following Jesus' birth.

Some time after the 4th century, the focus shifted from Jesus' baptism to an emphasis on the nativity and the visit by the Wise Men. It moved from Jesus' baptism, a transforming event which happened to him when he was an adult, to a relatively insignificant event which occurred shortly after his birth. I find this change in focus unfortunate, for I believe Jesus' baptism was far more important to his spiritual evolution and the realization of his call than the visit from the Wise Men, an event of which he was undoubtedly totally unaware.

It is interesting that the letters of Paul, the earliest New Testament documents, make no mention of the Magi. Paul seems to have regarded Jesus' birth as relatively insignificant in the whole scope of things. The writer of the first gospel, the Gospel of Mark, seems to agree with Paul. Mark makes no mention of either the Magi or the birth, but rather begins his description of Jesus' life and ministry with his baptism. Some of the other early Christian documents, e.g., the gnostic gospels which predate our four gospels but were not included in the canon, also make no mention of Jesus' birth or the visit of the Magi.

Approximately fifty years after Jesus' death, in the Gospel of Matthew, we first hear of the Magi. In the centuries that followed, legends began to fill in the gaps or fill out the gospel narrative. For example, Matthew makes no mention of the number of the wise men. He says,

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.

Matthew does not say there were three wise men. The number three has been assumed from the three gifts which were left at the manger. The description of the kings and the gifts they brought were taken from the prophecy in Isaiah 60:

*Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . . .
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

According to legend, the Magi, who were well versed in philosophy, medicine, science, and astrology, rode into Bethlehem from three different directions on white camels. They met for the first time just outside the city of Jerusalem. On the twelfth day of their journey together, they finally found the Christ child. As you know, twelve is one of those archetypal numbers that appear throughout the scriptures of not only our religion but many religions. There were twelve

sons of Jacob, twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve disciples. There are also twelve signs in the zodiac and twelve months in the year. The number twelve signifies wholeness or completion.

Tradition reports that the first Wise Man, Balthasar, was a middle-aged, dark-skinned scholar from Ethiopia. The second, Melchior, an old man, was either a Hindu from India or an astrologer from Arabia. Caspar, the third Wise Man, was a young man from Greece. But these are just legends.

The three gifts are highly symbolic. Frankincense, which was given by Melchior, symbolized the priestly ministry of Jesus as a bridge-builder between people and God. Myrrh, brought by Balthasar, was used to embalm the dead. This symbolizes the importance of death in the process of rebirth, both for Jesus and for us. The gold given by Caspar reminds us that Jesus is king, not a king who rules nations by power, but one who rules our hearts by love.

The two primary celebrations that we observe in Epiphany, the Magi's visit and Jesus' baptism, are both exemplified in its meaning. Epiphany means to make known, to make manifest. God was made manifest in the birth of Jesus. God was also made manifest in Jesus' baptism.

The festival of Epiphany is more than just the celebration of an historical event, an historical event of dubious authenticity. It is the celebration and hopefully also the experience of the discovery of the Christ, the Holy Spirit who filled us with God's energy at the time of our birth, when we were born, and who fills us again with energy at the time of our spiritual rebirth. The Magi realized that the baby Jesus was the Christ, the Word of God become flesh. Jesus, at the time of his baptism, realized he was an incarnation of God, that God was living in the world of space and time through him. This kind of discovery or realization is a *metanoia*; it changes people's lives.

When is Christmas over? When does this beautiful experience of giving and receiving, of celebrating God's great gift to the world and also to us finally end? When does the star that calls us forth to the spiritual journey begin to fade? When is the incarnation of the Holy Spirit finally and fully accomplished? Is it over on December 25? Is it over on January 6?

It is never over, or it should never be over! Christmas needs to be a part of our joy-filled *and* grief-stricken world in the year to come! Christmas can never be over if we understand the deeper meaning of Epiphany, which we celebrate today.

Remember, the word epiphany means to reveal, to make manifest. There are two parts to this revelation. The first is our awareness of how God is revealed to us, how God becomes

manifest to us, how God enters our lives. God can be revealed to us, can become manifest to us in many ways. As Christians we believe that God became manifest to the world in and through Jesus. This is what the Wise Men discovered, but only because they had the faith to embark upon what most people would have regarded as a foolhardy spiritual journey. Their faith led them to follow the star, the star of Bethlehem to the discovery of a new manifestation, a new revelation of God. This changed their lives.

The second lesson of Epiphany is that God can not only become manifest *to us*; God can become manifest *through us*. Just as the Wise Men became symbols of faith and their trek to Bethlehem became symbolic of our own pilgrimage, our own spiritual journey, people can become conscious of God through us. I love the saying that I saw on a plaque so many years ago: “Live your life in such a way that those who do not know God but who know you will come to know God through you.” If we were looking for a single guideline, a single resolution that would shape the way we live in the year to come, we couldn’t do better than this!

In the cold and barren beauty of this winter season, in the symbolism of light, and in our communion service this morning, a service of presence, let us seek, as the Wise Men did of old, the birth of the Christ child in our world and in our lives. On this day, this Christian festival with all its rich symbolism, let us open ourselves as Jesus did, at the time of his baptism, to the Holy Spirit who can transform our lives. On this day, and on every day in the year to come, let us be open to a true spiritual rebirth.

Then let us become carriers of God’s great revelation through the way we live our lives, as we reach out in love, compassion, and care to everyone whose path crosses ours.

Today is not the last day of the Christmas season. If our hearts are as open to God’s revelation as the Wise Men’s were, and if we become people of faith, incarnating and making manifest God’s revelation to the world, Christmas will never be over!

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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