

## LET'S MAKE CHRISTMAS LAST!

(01/06/20)

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” or what Darlene calls “Armenian Christmas” (which is January 6, twelve days after Christmas), but this year I'd like to leave them up a little longer. I have enjoyed just sitting and reading with the lights on the Christmas tree filling our living room the past two weeks.

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 through the Sunday after Epiphany. Our sanctuary is absolutely beautiful! One of our guests on Christmas Eve has remarked on the beauty, on the special feeling of this sanctuary and how important it was that she be here. 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, of presence that is at the heart of the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

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 end!

Epiphany Sunday, which we celebrate today, is the Sunday immediately preceding the liturgical celebration of 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 the date that was set aside to honor Jesus' baptism. During that event, 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 incorporated 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, both miracles of transformation. Only later, after the 4<sup>th</sup> century, did it come to include the visit of the Wise Men to the manger shortly following Jesus' birth.

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.

Although I understand what these writers are saying from a theological perspective, I believe Christianity and the Christian faith would be the poorer for the omission of the legends surrounding the birth, the incarnation of the Christ child. The story, which we heard again this year on Christmas Eve, is so full of symbolism, of mystery, of the transcendent. The symbolism of light alone, the light that came into the world in the birth of Jesus, the light that we share with each other on Christmas Eve, makes our celebration of Christmas truly special. I never want to get so "grown up" theologically that I am no longer touched deeply by the magic and the mystery of Christmas.

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 with archetypal projections. 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 one 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 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 suffering and 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.

Speaking of legends, I really like the legend that I recently came across and which I shared with you on Christmas Eve. Some scholars of world religions believe that the offering of the three symbolic gifts may have been in the form of a test. It has been suggested that the Magi offered these three gifts to the baby Jesus to see which one he would choose; the gift he chose would be an indication of the realm over which he would reign. According to legend, the baby Jesus reached out and chose all three. What an absolutely beautiful legend!

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 the celebration of an historical event. 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, 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. 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 spiritual journey, people can become conscious of God through us. I love the saying: "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 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, and in our communion service this morning, 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.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
January 5, 2020*