

Epiphany 2013

1.6.2013

**St. Stephen's, Oak Harbor**

Return to the Main Sanctuary

Rev. Dr. William Seth Adams

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Blessed be the Name of God

My Lord, what a morning! A long time coming and here it is. And look at who has gathered here to help us with this journey and new arrival. What a long--and short--distance we have traveled in the last few minutes!

And to make this transit on the Epiphany. What a happy turn of events! By all accounts, there's lots for us to talk about, so we'd best get busy.

An epiphany is a burst of light, or insight, or clarity, a revelation. Such things occur with some frequency in life, even as we bumble along. There are times when we get it, when clarity comes to visit, when we understand, when the scales fall from our eyes and we see the light.

The Feast of the Epiphany we celebrate today is rooted in the altogether familiar story of the visitation of the Magi, counted wise, perhaps magicians or soothsayers. Called "kings," but not likely really regal, no matter how outlandishly they may have been dressed. Considered by the hymn writer to be three, the Scriptural testimony tells us only that there were three gifts. The text is silent as to how many visitors there were. Even if unspecified, sometime during the Middle Ages, these "three" acquired names, Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. How many there were and by what names they were called to supper, we'll never really know.

These visitors introduce into the Christian story a very important ingredient and they sustain an image that has a profound influence on our theology and our self-understanding.

What we have here is the revealing of the Christ Child to the Gentiles. This is the Epiphany at the heart of our remembrance. These strangers, however mysterious, they are "from afar." They are not locals. They are not Jews. The star that has led them and that will lead them is their beacon from a far country. Fearing Herod's duplicity, that same beacon will lead them home. They come bearing gifts and offering adoration, and they are Gentiles. They come from the people the Jews call "the Nations," that is, everyone else in the whole world!

But their pilgrimage set a path for us, from wherever we have come. These visitors began a sequence of events that brought us close to God. We have followed in their tracks. The pathway here has two other stops on the way.

The next stop is the occasion in the Gospel where Jesus meets a Canaanite woman. [Mt 21-28; also Mark 7.25-30] He speaks to her in a very rude way, though it would have been common for a male Jew to speak harshly to a Gentile woman. You will remember the event. The woman pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus says, "I was sent only the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She continues to plead and Jesus says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What she says next converts Jesus to the true scope of his mission. "Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." "Woman, great is your faith," Jesus says, "Let it be done for you as you wish." By the tenacious logic of this Gentile woman, Jesus is forced to grasp his mission in a new way, one that includes the whole world!

What the Magi started and the Canaanite woman continued is completed by the persuasiveness of Paul. As the story is told in Acts 15, Peter understood that in order for Gentiles to join the emerging Christian community they would have to become Jews. Paul argued to the contrary. Gentiles could join the followers of Jesus without the intermediate step of becoming Jews. You and I are the beneficiaries of that decision.

So what we have for thanksgiving this morning is first of all, this remarkable fact. Our access to the promises of God, made available through Jesus to the non-Jewish world, that access is initiated by those visitors from the East, bearing gifts and offering praise and homage. For myself, I have never given great authority to people from the east, but in this case, I'm happy to make an exception. To these Wise Men, we owe our life with God!

It is also true that these easterners sustain the story of the Light, the story begun with the story of Jesus' birth and made lyrical in the beginning of John's gospel. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Light and darkness. Seeing and not seeing. Being led by the Light, the Star. This is the language of our faith and the particular language of Epiphany.

As we have engaged the travels of these Magi, we have done so on a morning when we ourselves have traveled as well. By one calculation, we have traveled but a few yards, or meters, or inches, or feet, whatever the distance between the small room where we have praised God for some years and this place. Not far if measured in linear terms. But there are other ways to measure.

Amy and I have been part of the St. Stephen's household for just over a year and that on a once a month basis. Hardly old timers! And although we have heard countless stories, we do not have St. Stephen's history in our bones. But some of you do!

There are some in this room this morning who remember "creation," and the things that have occurred between then and now.

There are those here who remember the halcyon days, when there were halcyon days, those who remember the time of troubles and disruption, the time of dislocation and the feelings that were generated in those times. In addition to us new comers and the wonderful visitors who share this morning, there is doubtless a wide array and mixed set of memories running loose, likely at this very minute.

For those with palpable memories, the distance we have traveled this morning may be similar in the imagination to the distance those easterners traveled long ago. It may be a few yards across the driveway, but in heart and remembrance, it is a much longer distance.

So, the preacher asks, have we traveled backward or forward? In walking across the drive, have we regained something of our past or have we taken a step toward an undefined future? Which way are we looking, in making this passage? Have we finally begun to get back to where we were however many years ago, or are we on a new path? It may be too soon to know.

Beginning today, we will again be offering our voices and praises to God in this room, familiar to some, a novelty to others. Over time, we will adjust to what this space makes possible and what it promotes. We won't have to move furniture to deliver communion. We won't have to figure out who goes first behind the altar because we don't have room to pass each other. We won't have to move a music stand out front for preaching purposes. In time, perhaps right away, we'll adjust.

But back to my questions, which way are we going? Which way do our travels take us? To put it another way, given the fact that Epiphany is a season of brightness and the opening of eyes, an experience begun by the leading of a star, where is the Light for us?

I've burdened you with several questions, intending honestly to cause you to think, but I should also venture some answers of my own, just to be playing fair.

However familiar this room may be and whatever it means in terms of reclaiming something, I hope that this move brings newness to this room as well. I would hope this move sets us on a new course, a course that takes our well developed sense of hospitality and welcome, our eagerness to pray for each other and for the cares of the world, our commitment to things in the world that matter, especially here in Oak Harbor, I'm hopeful that each of these St. Stephen's strengths will get lots of exercise and become even stronger. I'm hopeful that the lure of "how it used to be" can be acknowledged and then set aside. What we have to figure out now is how it ought to be, now, for us, in this new world. What new thing is God offering to us by our return to the shelter of this house?

I am mindful of T. S. Eliot, who wrote,  
We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time. [“Little Gidding,” V.]

As to the other question I put—where is the Light?—my answer is that it is not here, any more than it was in that wonderful little room where we have been until now. The Light is always leading us on, drawing us into something else, something new. Try as we may to contain it, to neutralize it, to domesticate it, we cannot. The Light is not so much whimsical or capricious as it is drawing us into a world more just, more humble, more redolent with praise than we can imagine. That the Light has led us here, across the driveway and across years, that is indisputable. And while the Light will continue to lead us, that Light will not reside here. We cannot contain that energy. It will always be drawing us into whatever God’s future holds for us.

Some years ago, the father of someone I once knew was traveling, looking for work. Not a man given to wasting time or words, he sent home a postcard with a message that is useful to us this morning. He wrote, “Arrived here. Going on.” That seems something wise for us this morning. So, we thank God, we have arrived here. And we thank God, all the more, we are going on.

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