

The Sunday of the Epiphany 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Nigel Taber-Hamilton

When do you take down your Christmas decorations? The Twelfth Day of Christmas? I have a friend who insists the only reason that we're supposed to remove the decorations on the twelfth day is because by that time there's no room in the house – it's full with drummers, pipers, lords, ladies, maids (shades of Downton Abbey!), swans, geese, gold rings, calling birds, french hens, turtle doves, a partridge and - for heavens sake - a pear tree!!

And it's not just the space they take up, my friend says – he 's fond of quoting Benjamin Franklin's saying that "guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days!" Time, at least, to say good by to the fifty drummers, pipers, lords. Ladies and maids!

Our of our former bishops, Nedi Rivera, has a family tradition that the Christmas decorations stay up until Ash Wednesday eve. Now I like that idea!

But joking aside, most of us will take down our decorations pretty soon - in the case of these decorations in church in a matter of hours.

This Season of Good Cheer – this unusual season where "good will" seems to trump pretty much everything else – seems to start with Thanksgiving and build to a climax with the Christmas - New Year celebrations - a week when everyone seems to slow down, relax, and allow a good spirited and mellow feeling to take over. We as Christians might do the timing a little differently – not seven but twelve days from the Latin Church's celebration of Christ's birth on December 24-25 to the Orthodox Celebration of Christ's birth on January 6 - but it's essentially the same thing - a window of celebration.

Not everyone can do that, of course – not everyone can celebrate; for some the season is really very hard; but for most of us relaxation and good cheer are the norm. That's the way it's been for me this year, as it has been for most years, and I hope each of you can say the same.

Now what?

What happens to the "holiday spirit?" That good cheer always seems to go away right about now - or, at least, within a few days. The realities of the world reimpose themselves; we start to notice the things we may have pushed away – those unpleasant items in the news that we wished we didn't have to know about – another plane missing at sea, tensions between nations, tensions in communities, financial challenges, emotional disturbances.

It's almost as if this sort of world confronts us like a boardwalk barker rudely yelling 'welcome back;' and 'now it's time to pay the piper....'

There's a strong hint of that sort of transition in today's gospel reading – on the one hand, a birth – a flash of celebration – then persecution and death as the sidebar to yet another story of a refugee family fleeing violent oppression.

Perhaps that's why we're not surprised when the "real world" that reimposes itself on us is filled with doubt and sorrow – we expect it.

The challenge of the Christmas-Epiphany story (yes, it is only one story) for us is that it isn't supposed to be a brief respite from an otherwise cruel, heartless world, an escape into a brief shiny paradise before we return to the fires of hell! To buy into that narrative, to accept its imposition on us passively, is, I believe, not simply to admit defeat but to snatch that defeat from the jaws of victory!

Because that's what it is – admitting defeat simply because we're being told that "that's how it is."

It is the empires of the world who want this narrative to hold sway – the military and financial and intellectual empires that are the enemies of true democracy and true faith.

The story we remember – and celebrate – today, is a challenge to Empire. The Wise Visitors, no matter how many there were (!) were much more than simple window-dressing for what has become the standard 21st Century creche. In their time they represented what had been a long-standing resistance to the Roman imperialism to their west. These mysterious figures call to mind for us the older stories from the Bible: about the rivers Tigris and Euphrates and the Garden of Eden between them; Ur of the Chaldees, the home of the great ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, and of the first Covenant, the first Promise of God to save the people.

Their visit echoes the way that both Matthew and Luke poked their metaphorical fingers in the eye of Rome itself, and all its puppets, which included Herod. It is not Caesar but Jesus who is Lord, Savior, the Child who leads; it is not the wisdom of Roman Imperial theology that understood victory to be achieved through violence and war, but the mysterious wisdom that – in paying homage to a helpless child – proclaims the coming theology of Jesus and Paul: victory through peace and justice.

These mysterious easterners offer an alternate narrative to the one that we can so easily be captured by: that peace and justice are central to our lives of faith, and that they are – and they should be – so not simply for a few short days a couple of times a year, but every day.

Our faith calls us not to accept and embrace the narratives of others, not to accept the status quo, not to accept the stories spun to subdue or confuse or silence, or hypnotize us into a sort of trance where we no longer care about what happens in our world or to others but only care about our own self-interest.

Our faith calls us to challenge these narratives with one of our own – the story of joy that confronts despair, of love that confronts hate, of peace that confronts violence; the story that calls us to place others, especially the least and the lost, before ourselves – and to do so not just for a few short days at the darkest time of the year but every day of every season in that year – and every year.

This is the true meaning of Christmas-Epiphany. Can we make it our own?

