

This Sunday morning we commemorate the Feast of the Epiphany, though it is traditionally observed on the 6th of January, the 12th day after Christmas. Since it is a rare occasion when the 6th of January actually falls on a Sunday, the Church often re-arranges the calendar as we have today that a Sunday congregation be able to observe this ancient feast.

Honored since the third century even before Christmas became a part of the church's calendar, Epiphany is derived from the Greek—*epiphaneia*, which is translated as *manifestation* or *appearing*. You all have heard the expression—*to have an epiphany*—an “*A Ha*” moment in which one suddenly is struck by a new awareness—the “light goes on”—one comes to clarity through a new way seeing, understanding—one wakes up to a new way.

The Feast of the Epiphany notes all the ways in which the incarnation—the nativity of Jesus—the gift of God's love in his only begotten Son, Jesus, has been made known to the world. From the time of the early church these *revelations*, or *showings* as they are sometimes called, have aligned themselves with the scriptural accounts of the early life of Jesus. The observance of Epiphany in the early church, for example, embraced Jesus' baptism which, though taking place much later in his life, clearly announced God's purposes for Jesus that all the world would know of his power and purposes. Generations of Christians have followed in Jesus' footsteps, also being baptized that we more fully claim our relationship with God.

It was only in the fourth century that the Church recognized the importance of commemorating the birth of Christ and began observing the feast of the Incarnation on the 25th of December, usurping a Roman, pagan festival previously known that day. As Christmas became the sole feast devoted to Christ's nativity, the observance of Epiphany narrowed in focus aligning itself with the revelation of Jesus as the light of the world, and not just the light that would enlighten the Jews. Epiphany was aligned with the story of the Magi.

Arriving in Bethlehem following the long journey from the East, the Magi recognized the power of this new revelation—God in Jesus—offering their gifts to the Christ child before returning to their countries of origin. Returning home, they proclaimed the news of the birth of the Savior of the world in order that all might follow Christ.

In many parts of the world and especially in Latin countries, Epiphany is the biggest day of the Christmas season—the day when gifts are exchanged. Gift-giving on Epiphany rather than Christmas morning recalls the costly treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh the Magi offer the Christ child in Bethlehem. In Shakespeare's England, Twelfth Night was such a big day that special entertainments were composed and plays re-enacting the stories of Christmas came to a ringing close on Epiphany, the final day of Christmas observances. Twelfth Night not only brings the Christmas season to a close, but also inaugurates the festive days of Carnival that will lead to Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras. King Cakes, into which small trinkets or favors are baked and shared suggest the surprise and joy—new revelations of meaning and understanding—which is the very heart of Christmas.

For most English speakers, Epiphany rarely is a large-scale festival; better known as the time in which we un-do Christmas—taking down Christmas lights and decorations, putting away the ornaments, candles and all the wonderful things that make Christmas, tucking it all away for another year.

W.H. Auden speaks of this Epiphany season, post Christmas let-down in which he gains the title for his piece (For the Time Being; A Christmas Oratorio, when he says:

*Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough*

*Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our power. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable ...
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city.....*

For the time being, here we all are, back in the moderate Aristotelian town of Westport. It is a new year and, might I ask the question? What difference will the observance of Christmas make in our lives this new year?

When Auden refers to the “moderate Aristotelian city” he is, of course, referring to us and our world. This is a world in which we assume we think logically, act rationally, and behave reasonably. If in accepting this Aristotelian methodology, let us review the world in which we live. Is the world reasonable, logical and functioning by cause-and-effect? Yesterday Israel sent ground troops into Gaza in the attempt to eradicate the terrorist movement of Hamas—an organization that does not recognize the sovereignty of the State of Israel. This intractable tension between Jew and Muslim is an expression of ancient hatreds centuries and even thousands of years old, arising from the differences of two blood brothers—Isaac and Ishmael. What “reasoned”, “logical” argument will sort out this ancient conundrum? Won’t it take something beyond “reason” to mollify?

Or take the interesting financial predicament the world finds itself in at this moment. With all the explanations and rationalizations of how we came to this situation in which so many are losing so much, what explanation all you heard that could possibly quell the insatiable and indefatigable fear that has seized the world? What “reasoned argument” will ever be able to satisfy the deep-seated fear of so many of us anxious that we will not have enough, that we will not be able to get our hands on our share?

And so I ask; where now is our faith? Where is the revelation the Magi carried home in their hearts in their beholding the Christ child? Is this something we can possibly know in our minds? Or is it something that we can only acknowledge through our hearts? Is it evident or visible on our faces? Does the world know what we believe because we act differently, we who know the power of love in Christ? What Good News do we speak and offer in our lives? Is there an *A HA experience* realized through Christ and our faith that we will we carry into the new year?

I conclude this morning by sharing a thought of a wise Rabbi of the 20th century—Abraham Heschel, who once wrote: *As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information, but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.* How much wonder is there in our lives? Do we as believers live by wonder or reason? Which will be that for which we are remembered?