

As with gladness men of old,
Did the guiding star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light,
Leading onwards beaming bright,
So, most gracious God, may we
Evermore be led to thee.

In an infrequent set of circumstances, this 12th day of Christmas falls this year on a Sunday. By this we have the opportunity in Sunday worship to reflect on the Feast of Epiphany, an ancient celebration in which Christians throughout the world are called to embrace the revelation (the showing) of the love of God in God's son, Jesus Christ.

This twelfth day of Christmas, the sixth day of 2008 concludes our observance of Christmas, inviting us into a new liturgical season – the Sundays after Epiphany. Unfortunately, this season of Epiphany, known best through a series of memorable stories from scripture declaring God's love for the world, will be significantly shortened this year because Ash Wednesday and Lent arrive at its earliest, the 6th of February. And so before Christmas and Epiphany slip away all together, it is my hope to share a few ideas that may have been lost in all our hurry and haste these past few weeks.

The celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany wonderfully fit together. From Christmas Eve on, we have been called to embrace and be embraced by the glory of Incarnation, God-born-among-us full of grace and truth. Similar to the Wise Ones who returned home with a newly awakened awareness of the love of God, Epiphany affirms that we, too, are called to be Christ-like and be Christ's light to the world.

Our celebrations these past weeks have been marked by what we might call a *sweetness* made known through familiar images: crèches, Christmas trees, toys and gifts for the Way of the Magi, luminaria and candles, singing *Silent Night* in our darkened church and on Main Street, the Christmas pageants of our Preschool and church school, the smell of evergreens and wreaths, as well as the warmth and generosity of the many who reached out to us with cards and gifts and hospitality. All these and more are reminders of the power of the love of God and living presence of Jesus Christ. From all these signs and symbols we strive to savor the sweetness of Christmas the whole year through.

With the coming of the Magi on the Feast of the Epiphany, our Christmas story turns. It reminds us anew of the character of the world in which we live. New Hampshire's primary, following fast on the Iowa caucus, tossed together with a dramatic dip in the stock market, recoiling retailers and auto makers, rumors flying about recession, and oil prices continuing to rise stir up considerable anxiety and stress for many here at home without even considering wars and rumors of war around the world. Christmas winds down and the world braces for who knows what in 2008.

Scripture tells us that in their search for the Christ child, the Wise Ones pass through a web of intrigue woven by Herod, the jealous and vengeful ruler of Palestine. Like tyrants, dictators and despots of every age, Herod represents the ever-present anxieties around which our world spins so often out of control. Because hatred, jealousy, envy and greed are so easily manipulated by the Herods of every age, these forces will not easily, nor certainly of their own accord, give way to the in-breaking of the love of God in Christ Jesus. As in our Epiphany story, it will take wise and faithful ones to slip through the webs of intrigue and fear strangling our world, those daring to proclaim allegiance to Jesus the son of God.

We who have been drawn to the manger find that our encounter with God, as it was for the Wise Ones, changes us. Awakened to this new awareness of God's love, we cannot return to our old ways nor to the familiar patterns of our lives. This is God on earth—God-deep-in-the flesh—now claims our allegiance, an allegiance more powerful than all other things. And so to know Jesus, to acknowledge God not just in Christmas pageants and other occasions of

sweetness, but to claim him as Lord as others return to their old ways is our challenge this morning.

One of the most intriguing passages of all the scriptures is the last verse of our Gospel lesson. *And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they (the wise men) left for their own country by another road.* When we encounter the living God, God makes claims and demands upon us compelling us to change our lives. We cannot return to the everyday by the old, familiar pathways of habit and custom. We have been changed, but the world has not. The gospel of Matthew tells us that Herod, infuriated and upstaged by this new King and shunned by the Wise Ones, attempts to do away with this child, killing every infant under the age of two in Bethlehem.

Gathering up this new-born King, Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt in like millions of refugees before them and following them, who have had to escape from the wrath of jealous rulers of the world. Even as a child, Jesus knows the bitterness of exile, as did his ancestors in the lands of Egypt, Babylonia and Assyria.

We have suggested that it is time to put away our Christmas decorations, time to face the world as it is, not as we wish it would be. Our hope is that like the wise ones we have been changed, transformed by our renewed sense of Immanuel, of God with us, and that we are different as we return to our everyday. And like the wise ones we carry a new light in our lives, a light that shall illumine our way showing us especially things we did not previously believe we could do, that are now well within our reach, for God is among us. And with God all things are possible.

So how will the world know that we who have been to the manger are different now? What will we do, what will we say that will convey to the world that we have slipped through the trappings and intrigue of this world and will live especially this new year in a wholly new way?

Let me suggest two things to consider. I hope all of you are aware that our Episcopal Church, even and especially in the midst of the controversy consuming our church in the past few years has made a deep and faithful commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, (MDGs). This is a commitment by the year 2010 to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development. These are laudatory and far-reaching goals and some may say, a foolish endeavor. How can even a dedicated group of Christians around the world do all this in the time allotted? Will we cease this attempt even before we get started?

As our national Episcopal Church has committed 7/10s of a percent of its budget to this challenge, and as Episcopal Churches around the country take up this invitation, so has Christ & Holy Trinity. Our Faith in Action Committee has committed more than \$40,000 to this work and ministry this year, a significant portion of which is earmarked for the MDGs. We too, each of us and our families, can make a similar commitment. Even as we respond to a host of needs, duties and obligations in our own homes and communities, what small, yet significant things can we do that will show the world that we have been to the manger and that we have been changed by the experience? What light do we now carry, what illumination shines through us that the world will know that we claim Jesus as our Lord and savior and that no Herod, nor any web of treachery or intrigue will darken that light.

If MDGs are not your thing, then what about being a shepherd or teacher in our Discovery Kingdom program for church school? What light illumines your life? If that light is vital and important to you, would you not want to pass on that light to a new generation that they too may know what brightens and marks your life?

Epiphany is the time we, who have been changed, acknowledge God in a new way. God is God, light from Light, true God from true God. God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. If this is true and we believe it, what will we do and how will we show that love, light and fact of our lives?