

6 January 2010  
Epiphany Sunday  
St Matthew 2: 1 - 12

Today is Epiphany, the twelfth day after Christmas, and this somewhat minor holy day on the Church calendar has an interesting origin and history. We'll look at it because it teaches an important message to us. We know the story. Jesus was born, and in some distant country astrologers, the scientists of their day, realized that there was celestial activity in the constellation Capricorn which is represented by the symbol of a ram. Now, the astrologers knew that the ram was also associated with kingdom of Judah and its capitol in Jerusalem. They concluded that something very important was happening there - perhaps the birth of a new king. After all, Herod had been alive for many years, and was an old man. According to the gospels, off they went on a fact-finding mission, and as we know, met with Herod, went on to Bethlehem following the Christmas star, and came to the stable to worship Jesus and bring gifts. But knowing that Herod was a despotic tyrant of the worst sort, they decided to take the back-roads to by-pass Jerusalem and return to the relative safety of their own country.

There is the story according to the Gospels, but after that, myth and legend begin to take over. The Gospels do not tell us how many of these wise men travelled to Bethlehem, but in 1857, Father John Hopkins of Christ Episcopal Church wrote the beloved carol, "We Three Kings". And suddenly, we embraced the number that there were three foreign visitors. An opera - Amal and the Night Visitors followed, and then a mythical story of a fourth wisemen who trailed behind. Perhaps one reason we embraced it is because three is also representative of the Trinity, as well as the three gifts - one from each of them. I got into serious trouble in Sunday school one time when I said maybe there were more than three and one of them forgot to bring a hostess gift.

The myth and legend becomes even more complex and removed from the gospel story because the early church adopted the tradition of celebrating the birth of Jesus on the 25th of December. It was done for a very good reason. For centuries the most decadent of all Roman holidays began on the winter solstice, the 21st of December, and it lasted for about two weeks until the 6th of January when there was more daylight with each passing day. Trust me, this was Rome at its most decadent worst. In turn, many of the early church fathers were very worried that some of their members, especially new converts, would break away from Christ and return to the old deities and practices, just so they could enjoy a two week party. They decided to hold their own celebration - the birth of Jesus. And they

brought this season to an end on Twelfth Night, or Epiphany, commemorating the arrival of the Wise Men. So, these twelve days became the Season of Christmastide.

As I said, there are endless myths and legends in an attempt to explain and fill in some blanks.

Now, we can be fairly certain that when the Wise Men left Bethlehem to return home, they had ample opportunity to talk through everything they had experienced - the Christmas star, the activity in the constellation of Capricorn, their meeting with Herod, and of course, their time in Bethlehem. Then, when they got home, they would have told their fellow scientists of all they had learned.

That is what scientists in all areas do. But it isn't just scientists - it is all of us. We talk about what we have seen and heard, our experiences, and bounce ideas off one another.

Knowing this, the early church fathers decided that at the end of Christmastide, and after the day of Epiphany, we would observe the Season of Epiphany - a time when the emphasis would be placed on telling the good news of Jesus, or as we call it today, evangelism. The wise men took the story, the good news of Jesus, back to their associates; we take the message of Jesus to the world. Later, after the Resurrection, the Lord's disciples and others took the story to the rest of the world.

It follows that the symbol for this season is light. More daylight returning to the northern hemisphere, Jesus as the light of the world, taking the message of Jesus into the world. And even though it is a holy day that is hardly observed, on February 2nd, while we fixate on the weather forecast from a Pennsylvania based groundhog, the rest of Christianity observed Candlemas - the day when Jesus was presented in the temple, 40 days after his birth, and the priests and bishops bless the candles brought by their members.

The way in which we do mission work has changed from the distant past, but the importance of evangelism and missions has never changed. We no longer send men and women to far away places with strange sounding names, nor to the western frontier of this country. But the message of Jesus must be constantly retold, from one generation to the next, or it will be lost.

We must be prepared for talking about our faith, and I can't think of any two better examples than here at All Saints. For the last few decades, every single Sunday, Carol and Bruce Schock have led our children's Sunday school class. When I came here, there were no children, then for a while we had upwards of 20. But they grew up and moved on with their lives, and the number diminished. Now, it is a handful. It doesn't matter. Every single Sunday, they are prepared to tell the story of Jesus in ways

that the children understand. The other example is the work done by Peter Schakel - the adult Sunday school and the Brotherhood of St Andrew.

But it can't be their work alone. It is the privilege and responsibility of all of us. And it isn't that difficult. Christ gave us two commandments: Love God, love other people. That's a good starting point. Just talk about your relationship with God, and let it grow into how you apply it in your other relationships.

Take a look at our baptism vows as beginning - what it means to love God, what it means to uphold the dignity of every other person, what it means to respect God, respect others, respect our vows that we make to God and to others.

Being able and ready and willing to talk with another person is evangelism, and that is because true evangelism has always been the most successful when it is one on one. It's not lecturing, it's not preaching, it is connecting, conversing, being with other people.

It never takes a lot of God talk or knowing all the right words to use. It certainly doesn't take a degree in systematic theology. In fact, sometimes that sort of head knowledge gets in the way. It's having a conversation where we are prepared to talk about our relationship with Jesus.

We must remember that words alone are never enough. It takes actions that are integrated with what we believe and profess. In other words, we have to live our faith, live the baptism vows we make, live the Lord's prayer including forgiving others and ourselves. We have to remember the early childhood lessons of respect. Recognition is nice, and we all want to be recognized. But to earn the reputation of being man or woman who respects others and themselves - that's far more important than recognition.

Often at the beginning of the year we make our New Year's Resolutions, and by now, most of us have already broken a few, so there is room to make a few new ones. Perhaps one will be that we will truly be the people of the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ.