

The Epiphany
St. Matthew 2:1-12
January 5th, 2020
St. George's Episcopal Church
Fr. Chris

Light and Gifts

Epiphany is all about light and gifts. There is the light guiding the wise seekers to Bethlehem and there are the gifts that they bring. The Gospel of Matthew does not call them Kings, though they may have been, but wise seekers. The idea that they were kings would come much later from the hymn or carol, "We Three Kings of Orient are" penned by John Henry Hopkins some time in the nineteenth century. [He lived from 1820-1891.] This event, this child is not ordinary. This is not something limited to Israel. This is an event that will touch the world, and wise people have come from afar to see what is happening. The birth of Jesus is now an international event.

The Light...

It begins with light, starlight. This light leads the seekers from afar, from the East, to the land of Israel and finally to Bethlehem. It was a long journey and in those days, any long journey was a trying and challenging one. You really had to have a strong purpose and motivation to make one. It wasn't like jumping in your car and driving away in search of something you want to see or do. They didn't even know where they were going. Led by this star, they headed west until they located what this light was highlighting. They saw the light because they were looking. They had their eyes open. They had their minds open. They were led by faith and not fear.

In the darkness of the night, a new light has arisen. In the deep darkness of the night a star appeared and led them to the well they sought.

There was no electricity to light up the night. There was no light pollution to obscure the night sky. In those days, cities were lit by torches, oil lamps and candles. While these would cast a warm glow in the nighttime, they were hardly lit up like our modern cities. When you looked up, you could see hundreds of stars above you, the movements of which intrigued you. You watched them rise and set in the sky, like the sun of the daytime and many used them to navigate if they traveled by night. This was especially true of those on the sea traveling by night, if they did so at all. Was travel in the sands of the desert that different? There were few landmarks to guide you in the darkness. No GPS. No compass. These tools were yet to come. And if you were lucky, you had the light of a full moon. The wise seekers also had the light of a new star.

Light contrasts with darkness. Darkness does not just mean the absence of daylight. Darkness can describe a period of your life that seems drained of hope. Such darkness may not simply be in your own life, but may also be a corporate experience. Darkness like Job experienced. Darkness like many felt during World War II. Darkness like when gloom overcomes us and it appears the forces of darkness will prevail.

Enter a light, enter a star, if you look up and notice it. The wise seekers did. And they followed the light of the star.

The Gifts...

The gifts they bring, gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold represents the world's riches and resources. All things come of thee, O God, and of thine own have we given thee. Need I say more?

The Frankincense represents the symbol of the Spirit of God flowing out upon humanity. It is a special odor that inspires the mind to calm itself and plumb the spiritual depths. It is the reminder that a pleasurable odor can lead to spiritual reward, renewal and inner peace. And then the smoke of the incense rises above the worshipers and floats up to the heavens, like our prayers directed to God.

The Myrrh is an aromatic resin that comes from a thorny bush. It is often used for anointing and healing. It appears in mouthwash, some toothpastes and is used for healing on the skin. It has a bitter taste and it is said that the wine mixed with gall was actually wine mixed with myrrh that was offered to Jesus when he was thirsty on the cross. It was also used at His burial. Today in the church it is used in incense and also in the chrism with which a candidate is anointed at Baptism, and is very pleasantly aromatic.

These three gifts were symbolic and fraught with meaning. They are mentioned in the Gospel text as well as the famous hymn. Note the poetry and meaning of the words of the famous hymn:

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,
gold I bring to crown him again,
King forever, ceasing never,
over us all to reign.

Frankincense to offer have I;
incense owns a Deity nigh;
prayer and praising, voices raising,
worshiping God on high.

Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
breathes a life of gathering gloom;
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

Giving is the heart of the season we are in. We give gifts to one another in honor of the baby Jesus. We give to charities and remember those less fortunate than ourselves to honor him. The power of gift giving expresses our love, our care for another. The more personal, the more carefully selected, the greater the effect the gift will have. Shopping for the right Christmas presents, I have found, is a year-long process that begins now. When you see something that grabs your attention as being a perfect gift for someone you care about, stop, consider it and if it your hunch and your heart says yes, then pick it up and secret it away until next December.

We know how to give good gifts that please others. We can do so if we move out of ourselves and focus upon others. A gift does more for the giver than the receiver. What

delight we feel when we see the impact of our gifts on the faces of the recipients. What great reward when the gift is anonymous and we observe the response.

What can I give him? I am reminded of the hymn tune about the real gift that God desires from each of us. It is a gift we can give, no matter our status in life:

“What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what can I give Him?
Give Him my heart.”

What’s the big deal about such an astronomical event? Don’t you think God would have the power to do something like this? Have you ever seen the light in your life? Have you had an “Epiphany” moment and gained new insight into yourself, a loved one or friend, or discovered something you were searching for...?

Sometimes the gift is an opening of eyes that were blind and ears that could not hear before, ears deaf to the truth and deaf to learning new things. Most of all the gift is opening up our minds to process the gift of this new data coming in from our eyes and our ears. This is the breakthrough moment, the Epiphany.

We tend to call this a new light shining in the darkness. It is like grabbing a small flashlight so you can see better, and that light either illuminates your path forward or reveals what you were looking for. It reminds me of the simple hymn that leads us to share our light with others:

This Little Light of Mine

This Little Light Of Mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This Little Light Of Mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This Little Light Of Mine,
Yes, I'm gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine

The light that shines is the light of love,
Lights the darkness from above,
It shines on you and it shines on me,
and it shows what the light of love can do.
I'm gonna shine my light both far and near,
I'm gonna shine mine light bright and clear,
where there's a dark corner in this land
I'm gonna let my little light shine.
This Little Light Of Mine,
I'm gonna let it shine... AMEN