

Epiphany A January 5, 2008

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.
AMEN.

The 12 Days of Christmas.

Today is the 12th day of Christmas—so what did my true love give to me? 12 drummers drumming! If you look on the internet there are religious descriptions of the 12 days of Christmas—I don't know if I agree with all the symbolism that they use but I do think we need to be more mindful that there are 12 days of Christmas and the song could help us remember that!

For us, the Feast of the Epiphany marks the celebration that ends the twelve days of Christmas. I just learned about a beautiful old tradition about the star in the East. The story says that when the star had finished its task of directing the wise men to the baby, it fell from the sky and dropped down into the city well of Bethlehem. According to the legend, that star is there to this day, and can sometimes still be seen by those whose hearts are pure and clean.

There are other legends about this story of the wise men from the east. For instance, how many wise men were there? In the old days, they believed that there were 12 who made the journey, but now most everyone agrees there were three.

A work of St. Bede (d. 735) gives us names and a description of the three. He wrote, "The magi were the ones who gave gifts to the Lord. The first is said to have been Melchior, an old man with white hair and a long beard ... who offered gold to the Lord as to a king. The second, Gaspar by name, young and beardless and ruddy complexioned ... honored Him as God by his gift of incense, an oblation worthy of divinity. The third, black-skinned and heavily bearded, named Balthazar... by his gift of myrrh testified to the Son of Man who was to die."

Yet another legend goes on to tell us that after seeing the baby, the three continued traveling as far as Spain, telling the world the good news about what they had seen. These stories bring the wise men a little more to life, and add some color and a different dimension to the meaning of Christmas.

My favorite legend is hearing that they didn't keep the event of Christ's birth to themselves. After all it is a natural reaction to want to spread the word when

you've witnessed something so remarkable. I'm so glad to know that the Magi traveled to Spain—the land of my ancestors.

The celebration of Epiphany is a deeply held tradition in Spanish-speaking countries. In places where they have not been overly influenced by western culture the exchange of gifts happens on this day and not on Christmas. The Gospel story of the Magi bringing gifts is also the origin of the idea of giving gifts during Christmas. And although the giving of gifts is incidental to the main event, it has become the focus of this season.

A significant element of the Feast of the Epiphany, is that the visit of the magi fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament: in the Book of Numbers, Balaam prophesied about the coming Messiah marked by a star: "I see him, though not now; I behold him, though not near: A star shall advance from Jacob and a staff shall rise from Israel..." (Nu 24:17).

Psalm 72 speaks of how the Gentiles will come to worship the Messiah: "The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts, the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute. All kings shall pay Him homage, all nations shall serve Him" (Ps 72:10-11).

Isaiah also prophesied the gifts: "Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord" (Is 60:6).

The world had waited so long for the coming of the Messiah. So many years of prophecies and waiting! The Jewish world was waiting in anticipation of this event for hundreds and hundreds of years. When Jesus Christ finally did arrive, his birth was so unassuming that it almost went unnoticed.

Except for the star and the Magi who followed it to the place of his birth. Even Herod—himself a Jew—did not seek the Christ-child until the Magi came looking for him. Of course Herod did not want to honor Jesus and in fact the Gospel tells us that he wanted to destroy him.

It is entirely possible that the wise men didn't keep the news to themselves—they could easily have spread the news of Jesus' birth all through their travels. And

now it's our turn. It's our time to take the responsibility of spreading the Good News that Jesus Christ is here—in our midst.

Have you ever experienced something so wonderful and uplifting that you wanted others to experience it too? I'm sure that's what happened to the visitors from the east. It was too wonderful to keep inside. They couldn't help but spread the word!

Here's the key—they really believed that the birth of Jesus Christ was an event that changed the world—and the second part of the key was that they were convinced it was GOOD NEWS!

A lot of people are shy when it comes to speaking about their faith. Most people, especially Episcopalians, are reticent about saying anything that could be perceived as being religiously fanatical. We live in a very secular world and we were never taught that we should talk about our faith.

We also think that speaking about Jesus Christ puts us in the same league as those obnoxious Bible thumping televangelists we hear so much about. It just isn't appealing. Perhaps your hesitation stems from a concern that you are not versed in the bible or you might feel you don't know enough about theology.

The birth of Jesus Christ is a remarkable event in time and history and yet this unparalleled event doesn't make a difference if it is not real in our own lives. We need to have experienced the real presence of God before we can say anything of substance about it.

One way for us to change our apprehension about sharing our faith is to first have such a wonderful and exciting relationship with the living God that we can't help but want to share, and second we have to practice talking about what we believe. Sharing our faith is not about being holy, or scholarly—it is simply about sharing how you experience God in your life.

The wise men gave us a wonderful example of a very natural reaction. They witnessed something extraordinary and realized it's significance. They couldn't help but spread the word. We too, can be wise like these folks from the east—and share our faith with those we encounter. Amen.