

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
January 5, 2014
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
 öStar Gazingö
Textö Isaiah 60: 1-6, Matthew 2: 1-12

Last Sunday, I was delighted to be able to worship once again at the Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration--at one of its three interfaith chapels in the Vail CO area. I don't often get to go there when I'm in town. If the family is going to church, we go to Eagle River Presbyterian. But last Sunday, the family was heading to the ski slopes, so I was able to sneak away.

At Transfiguration, the rector does a welcome, announcements, and children's moment before the opening procession. This time, he did a bit of a rant--about all of those who were dismantling their Christmas decorations and throwing out their trees on December 26. As a good Episcopalian, he was stumping for observing the full twelve days. (On the way back to my son's house, I passed the recycling center and, indeed, noticed the growing stacks of still-green trees!).

The final straw for Fr. Brook, though, was an encounter in the post office. We've all heard about the many delays of Christmas packages this year, ostensibly due to UPS, FedEx and the postal service underestimating the volume. Since Edwards CO does not have home delivery, the lines at the little post office were lengthy every day that week. And, I learned that the postal employees at the counter were renowned for their crabbiness (in fact, I learned that for myself on December 26!). And so it was with Fr. Brook.

When he finally got his package and turned to leave, he paused, and turned back to the employee and said, öMerry Christmas.ö The response was a growl. And then, a grouchy comment to the next customer, öHumph. Did you hear that? He doesn't even know that Christmas was on December 25!ö

Well, this rush to move on past Christmas is no wonder, I guess, when most of the

world is caught up in the decorations, music, and partying so early in the season! And the exhaustion of the preparations, the family traditions, yes, even Christmas Eve services--maybe a children's pageant complete with little angels, shepherds in bathrobes, and over-excited kids waiting for Santa! It usually even includes the wisemen and their gifts, though this is not biblical, this practice of combining the stories in Matthew and Luke into one Christmas Eve event when the shepherds and the angels and the wisemen all gathered together at the stable on the same starlit night. Not like our reading in Matthew this morning that tells us that the magi arrived much later, maybe even two years or so, and not at the stable but at a house where there were no shepherds, no sheep, no angel chorus.

Of course, there's no biblical evidence or our observance of twelve days of Christmas, either. It strictly reflects a human tradition, that evolved in the early Christian church by melding together several holidays and celebrations centuries after the birth of Christ. I suppose that I like the twelve-days and, especially, the celebration of Epiphany because it helps set aside some of the distractions, as special and traditional as they may be. It reminds me that Christmas is not just about the birth--a birthday party for Jesus--but about the broader and deeper meaning and significance of the Incarnation--the coming of God into our lives in human form, the ongoingness of God's presence in Jesus's life and ministry--even to his crucifixion and Resurrection. It is a story that cannot be isolated into a simple, charming tableau like a painting we put on our Christmas cards. It is a story that is woven into our very identity as Christians, carrying with it not only the warm and fuzzy tender joy of the mother and child but the realities of the cold and discomfort, the long journey of strangers following a star through unknown lands and uncertain paths, toward an unexpected end.

Epiphany, of course, means a manifestation--a breaking in of something that makes us see in a new way, transforms how we see, an "aha-ha" moment when something becomes clear. This "breaking in" wed's nicely in our religious tradition with the symbol of star-brilliant light that leads the way.

The star-brilliant light that led these magi--these priestly wise men, probably from Persia, who traveled all around the Mediterranean world. They were astrologers and interpreters of dreams, often selling their services in the courts of the kings.

They were educated in astronomy, astrology and the occult. They undoubtedly had some idea of what it was they were seeking when they decided to follow that bright Bethlehem star. A new king, something of major import that would have impact on their world. Whatever they knew was worth a great deal to them-- the long journey over the desert and into a strange land on the backs of camels. The risk and discomfort. The precious, expensive gifts they carried for the one they sought.

We know that they were gentiles-- outsiders, heathens. How interesting that Matthew's gospel virtually begins with evidence that God's message is meant for all people! Not just for the faithful, the chosen of Israel.

The star that led them, then, was a kind of bridge that connected the faith of the Jews with the rest of the world. Sometimes in our celebrations we overlook this-- we think only the faithful, the followers of truth as we have defined it-- receive enlightenment. We forget that the light, the epiphany, breaks in at surprising times and places by unexpected means.

For the magi, must have been surprised-- maybe even horrified and disappointed-- at what they found when the star came to rest. For it was not a palace, a king on a throne but a tumbledown house with a peasant couple and small child.

Yet there was something that caused them to kneel, to give their precious gifts, to ignore their orders to report back to Herod. They were able to drastically reorient their expectations and recognize that this, indeed, was where the star had led them. It was an epiphany so powerful as to overcome the expectations they brought, to defy logic.

Sometimes, when we are following our stars-- we experience our own epiphanies, and sometimes they lead us in perplexing, or even unwanted ways. We may be searching for truth or happiness or meaning, and what we find is vastly different from what we had in mind. Sometimes our preconceived notions of what we think we should

have or what we expect to happen makes us either doubt where we seem to be lead or causes us to even fail to see where we are going.

The Magi, after the long journey, the rough going through the desert wilderness could have turned back, could have taken their treasures and gone home, when they saw the poor peasant family. But they did not. They knelt, they worshipped, they gave their gifts, and perhaps, they went on to spread their story, even if they were still perplexed--even if they didn't fully understand what they had seen. Undoubtedly, they were changed and what began as disappointment became a blessing.

We, too, seek something extraordinary--maybe a truth or a dream, maybe something to which we can give our heart. As we walk our winding and difficult paths, we need courage and faith when we encounter the twists in the road. We need a wider view that doesn't turn away at the unexpected.

Sometimes, on our journeys, we seem to have insufficient light. We cannot see all the way to the end of the road so we are uncertain or frightened. But that Bethlehem star is good news to us. We do have enough light. We always have enough light-- for the Bethlehem star is within us. It is the light of Christ that burns deep in our hearts-- the manifestation and revelation of God that we celebrate in this Epiphany season. It is the light that drives away all darkness. We have only to look for it and to trust it. And accept that it may lead us to unexpected places-- places we cannot even imagine.

As the prophet Isaiah tells us, "Arise! Shine! for your light has come. and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!" May your light so shine!

Amen.