

## EPIPHANY -- THE DISCOVERY OF CHRIST

(01/08/12)

Scripture Lesson: Malachi 4:1-3  
Matthew 2:1-12

*“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother and they knelt down and paid him homage.” (Mt. 2:11)*

Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany. The Feast of the Epiphany, which is celebrated January 6, the twelfth day after Christmas, technically marks the end of Christmastide, the Christmas season, and it begins the season of Epiphany.

“Epiphany” means manifestation. It celebrates the revelation of Jesus as God’s child to the world beyond his homeland, Judea. This is the symbolism behind the curious story in the Bible about Magi visiting and bringing gifts from foreign lands.

Christian holidays have a history. Since they are grounded in the life of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament, and since they have always been a part of our lives, we assume they were always celebrated. This is not the case.

Take Christmas, for example. Christmas is the annual festival commemorating the birth of Jesus. It is celebrated on December 25 in all churches except the Church of Armenia, which celebrates it on January 6. I bet most of you didn’t know that. Since my wife is Armenian, I am tempted to say something about the well-documented Armenian tendency to be different, if not difficult, but since Darlene is here this morning and may actually be listening to my remarks, at least when she is not causing trouble in the choir loft, I will refrain from commenting on parallels between my beloved wife and the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The term “Christmas” was not used before 1123 C.E., where it appears in the Old English as “Cristes maesse”, meaning Mass of Christ. As biblical scholars have noted, the actual month and day of Jesus’ birth is unknown. Even the year of his birth is now reckoned to be between 4-6 B.C.E., meaning that the millennium, if it is

determined to be 2,000 years after Jesus' birth, actually came and went in 1996 without the world coming to an observable end.

The first books of the New Testament, the letters of Paul, make no mention of Jesus' birth. Apparently there was either no information available concerning it, or they did not consider it to be of any importance. It was only later, as the empty spaces in the mythological dimension of the God-man's life began to be filled in with archetypal projections, that the fine points of what supposedly happened began to circulate. This began to happen late in the first century after Jesus' birth.

As we have noted in our Sunday morning adult Bible study, the Gospel of Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, does not mention Jesus' birth. Matthew, who alone describes the visit of the three wise men, was the first to describe the birth, followed by Luke, who goes into even more detail, including word-for-word conversations. Then John, the last of the gospels to be written, once again does not mention the nativity.

The first mention of the celebration of the nativity is in the early 3rd century, with January 6 assigned as the date. The celebration included the commemoration of Christ's birth, his baptism, and the visit of the Magi. The nativity was celebrated in Rome as early as 336 C.E. It was celebrated on January 6, the common date of observance in the 5th and 6th centuries throughout the Christian world. So I guess the Armenians really do have a point!

The most widely accepted theory on the selection of December 25 for the celebration of Christmas is that this date was the date of a major pagan festival, that of Sol Invictus, the "birth" of the "Unconquerable Sun," marking the winter solstice, the sun's triumph over darkness. The date selected for the celebration of this festival was intended to be the first day of winter, which in the 4th century was believed to be December 25. With the triumph of Christianity throughout Europe thanks to the Holy Roman Empire, Christmas replaced the pagan festival and Christians began to apply

the term “Sun of Righteousness” (from Malachi 4:2) to Christ. The term “Sun of Righteousness” appears in the 3rd verse of the Christmas hymn *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*:

*Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings,  
Risen with healing in his wings.*

We can see the connection here between Jesus and the sun, especially the rising sun, in the bringing of light and life to everyone.

In light of the extensive religious and secular celebration of Christmas, at least in our culture, it is interesting that the celebration of Christmas began later than several other Christian festivals. Easter, which was celebrated in the spring to coincide with the worship of the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, Eostre, rather than being strictly tied to the Jewish Passover (as I believe it should be) was celebrated as early as the 2nd century. Epiphany also began to be celebrated at this time. This means that the early Christians regarded Epiphany as actually more important than Christmas.

Epiphany was not originally tied to the visit of the Magi. It would have been surprising if that event would have been important enough to celebrate, and certainly surprising if the visit of these three astrologers with their symbolic gifts was more important than the actual birth. Epiphany was originally the commemoration of Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:9), and also his first miracle, the changing of the water to wine at the wedding he attended in the village of Cana (John 2:1-11).

The early church regarded Jesus’ baptism as more important than his birth, for many believed that this was when God became manifest in him, when Jesus actually became the Christ. It is interesting in light of the emphasis placed on these events by the early church, by the people who knew Jesus personally, that the celebration of Christmas has come to be such a major festival for us, while Epiphany and Jesus’

baptism do not evoke the same degree of feeling. In fact, most Christians don't even know what month we celebrate Jesus' baptism.

In any event, all of the dimensions of Epiphany, which is also called "Little Christmas", come together in its meaning. Epiphany means to make known, to make manifest, to show forth. God was made known, made manifest to the world in the birth of Jesus. God was also made known, made manifest to Jesus in Jesus' baptism.

An epiphany is a moment of realization. The three kings who visited Jesus were wise enough to realize that something important had happened. They journeyed in search of this transforming event, and their lives were never the same after their visit to the manger. The dimension of realization that is associated with an epiphany also applies to Jesus who, at the time of his baptism, either realized or began to realize what it was that God wanted him to do and be. His life was never the same after his baptism.

The celebration of Epiphany is the commemoration and hopefully also the experience of the discovery of Christ, whether the discovery of the Christ in Jesus, as the wise men did at the manger, or the discovery of the Christ-like part of ourselves, as Jesus did at the time of his baptism. The Magi realized what others didn't realize. They saw what others didn't see. They realized Jesus was the Christ, the Savior of the world. At the time of his baptism Jesus also realized what others didn't realize. He realized that he was the child of God; he realized that God was incarnate, was living in the world of space and time through him. This discovery is a *metanoia*; it changes one's life .

Nowhere is the dimension of *metanoia* articulated so powerfully as in T. S. Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi." Since it is one of my favorite poems, not only because of its account of the journey as it probably happened, as a difficult and demanding journey, but in its symbolic foreshadowing of the death, the spiritual death, the death of ego that is inextricably intertwined with the birth of the Christ within us, I take the liberty

of sharing it with you this morning. If you have never heard this poem, listen for hints of the crucifixion and the call to discipleship that accompanies the celebration of the Birth.

One of the wise men speaks, reflecting back on their journey:

*A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.*

*Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.*

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different: this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.*

*We returned to our places, these kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.*

In the cold and barren beauty of this winter season, in the symbolism of light, in the giving of gifts to one another, we seek as the wise men did of old, as Jesus did when he turned to God in prayer, asking for guidance and strength in the living of his life, in the living of his call.

On this day, as we celebrate this Christian festival, with all its rich symbolism, let us open ourselves as the wise men did of old, as Jesus did at the time of his baptism, to once again discover the Christ who can transform our lives.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
January 8, 2012*