

The Star Leads Us Forward

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Epiphany

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Isaiah 60:1-9

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but God will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim God's praise. ⁷All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house. ⁸Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows?

⁹For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of God, and for the Holy One of Israel, who has glorified you.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered the child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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Epiphany. Tom Troeger suggests that it is a strange word to our ears. It sounds as awkward as a hippopotamus walking through a gift shop! Epiphany. The word comes to us from the Greek word *epiphaneia* which means appearance or manifestation. For the wise men from the east, it was the rising of a star that began their epiphany.

I love Joseph Donders poetic description of that star and its rising. He writes

It was in the middle of the night,
it was in the middle of their night,
that those wise men
saw a new star
at its rising.

The Greek text does not say
that they saw a star in the East,
The Greek text uses a technical, astronomical expression:
they saw a star at its rising.

They must have seen
Something special
in that star,
that night....
This star was special.
it was so special
that those wise men
decided that it had something to do
with a new beginning.

And they, then and there,
Resolved to follow it.

That must have been a crucial decision.
It meant leaving all they had,
at least for the time being.
It meant a farewell to so much that had been
dear to them up to then.
But they packed up and they went
to walk behind that star.

(from *Jesus, Heaven on Earth*, Joseph Donders, p.38-39)

It was that very star that drew them first to a palace in Jerusalem. What a natural place to expect to find a king. But there the chief priests and scribes suggest that they will discover the birthplace of the Messiah in Bethlehem, because it is the town mentioned by the prophet Micah. This is scandalous news for Herod. He feels threatened by a potential overthrow of his authority and orders his servants into a conspiracy of false hospitality as he sends the wise men on to Bethlehem to find this newborn king! We heard last week how, when the wise men did not return to him with news of the birth of Jesus, he ordered the death of all children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under so as to destroy any threat to his power.

But back to our Epiphany story. The wise men leave Jerusalem and travel to Bethlehem, following that same star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. Love beckons them – it is as strong as a magnet - and the light of the dawning star shows them the way. Because isn't that the essence of love? It is like a magnet drawing two people to one another, two friends to be together. Yes, God's love, born in human form and lying in a manger, called to those wise men to a stable in Bethlehem.

And the response of the wise men to God's gift of Divine Love was to return love with love. They brought fine gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh to express their love to God's beloved. Love met love on that first Epiphany long ago. The star led them to Bethlehem where they found the child and his mother and they delivered their gifts, all the things they had. They fell on their knees and worshipped him as the center of their new lives. Love transformed them. Symbolically, they went home by a different route. Nothing remained the same once they had encountered God's gift of love and showered their own love on that newborn babe.

So, I hope it will be for all of us in this post Christmas, Epiphany season. I pray that each of us will be drawn to the birthplace of the Christ Child, drawn to this gift of Love like a magnet. And that we will bring our whole selves and whatever it is that we want to offer as a Love Gift to our Savior. Love will meet love in that moment. God's love will mingle with our love. And we will leave that Epiphany moment, eager to follow the light of Jesus throughout all our days. The ancient prophecy of Isaiah **has been fulfilled!** "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but God will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you."

And so, even as the light of Jesus will lead us forward, we become God's epiphanies for others. We are radiant as the star. We literally "shine" with love and intentions of good will. We are the light of Christ to the world. How awesome! Perhaps how overwhelming?! How seemingly impossible. But remember, with God all things are possible.

Friday afternoon, in this very sanctuary, we celebrated the life of Kay Ingalls, who died rather unexpectedly on December 31st. For me, Kay was one of God's epiphanies! She had this wonderful, bright liveliness about her. Her smile, her quirky sense of humor, her compassion for others and her willingness to give generously of her resources as well as herself made her shine with God's love. For years she served as treasurer here at Holy Trinity. Not one to drive her car very much (she was ahead of her times!) she would walk to the church with the church financials in her canvas bag and bring her reports to the office for copying. She was friend to many and especially loyal to her adopted Sullivan family, who, for many years, lived across the street from her on Belgian Road. Kay is an example and a reminder to us that we don't have to be famous or wealthy or powerful to be God's epiphanies in the world. Today as we remember Leo Toleos, we also recognize that Leo was one of God's epiphanies. Loyal to church and to family, always giving of himself and caring for others, Leo was a living disciple of Jesus Christ. He, too, is a reminder to us that we don't have to be famous or wealthy or powerful to be God's epiphanies in the world. We simply have to be kind and generous, tolerant and forgiving, and dedicated to Jesus' teachings and way of life. That is enough. But it is a lifelong challenge. And when we feel the brightness dimming, we need to restore our love relationship with God and be infused with new energy and new light. Remember, the prophecy has been fulfilled. "Arise, shine; for

your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but God will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you."

Being an epiphany for God is something personal for each of us. But I would also like to think that we as a congregation can serve as one of God's epiphanies in the year to come. What better year to shine as a beacon in the community – this year when we celebrate 50 years at 16 Sylvan Street? Surely our vision, *Everyone in Ministry ~ United in God's Love* will be a source of our shining? our brightness of God's love and grace?

Today, the Task Force that is working on a draft of a Relational Covenant for Holy Trinity will be meeting. The document that they create will be a response to the 5th goal in our vision. Do you remember that goal which states:

As we seek to live as a diverse, inclusive community in Christ, we will be intentional in our respect for each other and celebrate our differences.

To realize this goal, specific suggestions were made and include the following:

- ❖ Develop a Relational Covenant (guidelines for how we are to treat each other)
- ❖ Train ourselves to give and receive feedback in a constructive and loving manner.
- ❖ Create opportunities to learn communications and conflict management skills.

The draft of the Relational Covenant will soon be circulated at Church Council, at committee meetings, in Sunday School classes and Youth Groups and Confirmation Class and will be sent out to members and friends of Holy Trinity for your suggestions. Hopefully, this document will provide guidelines on how we are to treat each other, speak to each other, address our differences and resolve our concerns and complaints. An 11th hour study called What Would Jesus Do? (WWJD?) How to Love Your Neighbor will begin next Sunday and continue for 4 weeks. It will provide an to learn conflict management skills and to practice new ways of giving and receiving feedback. What a great opportunity to better learn how to manage disagreements – whether it be in our church life or in our family life or at our work place or with our friends. Conflict happens! How we deal with it is a Christian discipline!

If Holy Trinity is to be one of God's epiphanies in the world, then we must work hard at learning how to model tolerance and acceptance of differences. I truly believe that realizing the 5th goal of our vision will be a stepping stone to new possibilities of managing disagreements and conflict and anger in our personal lives as well as in our life together as the body of Christ.

How else might we, as a church community, be a shining epiphany for God this coming year? Several families, this past year, have provided an inspiration for us all. I call what they did for Holy Trinity "thank offerings." These offerings or gifts to the church are made as acts of thanksgiving to God. They actually have a long biblical history. In Old Testament times, people regularly brought their tithes to the house of worship. And then, perhaps once or twice each year, they would also present a thank offering or a votive offering. It was an offering given out

of gratitude to God for something that happened in life. It might be an offering of thanks for a good crop, or for a financial windfall, or for an inheritance (*Right on the Money*, Brian Bauknight, pp. 58 – 59). It might be given out of thanksgiving for deliverance from serious illness or some other loss. It might be given out of gratitude for the birth of a child, or grand child or great grandchild or the purchase of a new home or a promotion at work

Toward the end of last year, two different families gave just such “thank offerings” to Holy Trinity. One family honored their children and grandchildren and in appreciation for their church and their church choir purchased new music binders for all of the members of the Senior choir. What a lovely “thank offering” that was.

Another family, who has only recently moved to Danvers and joined Holy Trinity, shared part of the settlement of a family members estate as a “thank offering” to Holy Trinity for being such a welcoming and loving community. They wanted to say “thank you” to God and to their new church. What a generous thing to do. What a lovely “thank offering!”

And so, these families have set an example for us all. And throughout the coming year, I encourage you to give your own “thank offering” to Holy Trinity as a way of expressing your gratitude to God for something in your life. Your gift will remain anonymous, but we will keep a running tally of our “thank offering” fund in the weekly bulletin and monthly newsletter. These gifts will be used to help meet the budgeted as well as unexpected church expenses in 2008. And they will be yet another means for us, as a church, to be an bright epiphany for God.

Love met love on that first Epiphany as the wise men were guided to the stable by the light of a star and then, found themselves so transformed, that they became God’s brightness as they went home by a different way, telling the good news to all.

And so, arise, shine, my friends; for **your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you.** ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but God will arise upon you, and God’s glory will appear over you. Let us be that light, that brightness, that shining, that epiphany – both individually and as God’s beloved community – in the year to come.

And may we always remember,

We, without God, cannot.

God, without us, will not.

And that only by Jesus’ grace and God’s light and love, we can!

So be it. Alleluia. Amen.