

January 2nd, 2022

Feast of the Epiphany observed, Year C

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Psalms 72: 1-7, 10-14

Matthew 2: 1-12

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'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.'"*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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." When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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 him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One January, while we were still living in Richmond, Tim had to make an unplanned trip to Michigan. His brother Peter was scheduled for emergency surgery, and Tim was needed to offer support and care to Peter's wife and family.

So, he packed quickly and jumped in the car, making the trip there in record time.

Bix, our corgi/pomeranian mix dog, and I settled into a new routine while Tim was away, my running home at lunch from St. Christopher's to take him for a quick walk, and a longer walk in the evenings when I got home.

One evening, as Bix and I prepared for our walk together, I looked out into the quickly falling darkness, and saw, amazingly, that the rain that had been falling all day had turned to snow! Big heavy flakes, that looked like the snow in a Charlie Brown Christmas!

Bix and I headed out the door bundled up, me in my winter coat and hat and Bix in his snazzy yellow raincoat! Bix, with his usual embracing of life was delighted with the huge flakes coming down so fast. He jumped up to grab them and looked about with joy.

We walked up our street in the darkness, now lit with the reflected light of so many flakes. We had reached the top of the hill and were now a good distance from home, when, with no warning, a huge, frightening boom echoed through the snow. Bix and I looked at each other, both stunned by this unexpected and disturbing sound, so counter to the delight of the snow. A second boom came, and I realized it was that odd and fairly rare occurrence, thunder snow. Accompanied by, of course, lightning.

As one, Bix and I decided it was time to turn around and head home. We hurried down the long hill, the snow now making the road slippery, and me aware that if I fell no one was home to miss us.

As we came around the curve and I could finally see our house, I exhaled in relief, struck by the sight of the light left on in the living room, shining in the darkness, showing Bix and me the way home, the way to safety and warmth, and dinner!

Today we celebrate, a little early, the Feast of Epiphany.

Epiphany is usually observed on the 12th day of Christmas, January 6th, but as that day occurs this Thursday, we are observing it today.

Epiphany, also often called the season of light, recalls the arrival of the Wise Men to visit the infant Jesus. We remember the journey they took, following the brilliant star they had seen, looking for the new king of the Jews.

The Wise Men's journey was much longer than that of the shepherds in their fields, just outside Bethlehem.

The Wise Men are believed to have come from the East, called Persia then, today likely the area roughly encompassed by Iraq and Iran.

They had a very long journey to Bethlehem, and thus symbolically we celebrate their arrival not on Christmas, but 12 days later on Epiphany.

The Wise Men come with their strange gifts for Jesus, not, of course practical, but deeply symbolic and recognizing the holiness of the infant.

They give gold for his kingship, they give frankincense, which was incense burned on the altar in the Temple, to recognize his priesthood, and they give myrrh, the spice used to prepare a body for burial, foreshadowing the death Jesus will suffer on the cross.

You likely noticed in our reading from Isaiah all the images of God's light: "Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.....the brightness of your dawn; you shall see and be radiant."

And then in our psalm, you likely noticed all the images of God's care for those in need:

*4 He shall defend the needy among the people; *
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.*

*12 For he shall deliver the poor who cries out in distress, *
and the oppressed who has no helper.*

*13 He shall have pity on the lowly and poor; *
he shall preserve the lives of the needy.*

*14 He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, *
and dear shall their blood be in his sight.*

And dear shall their blood be in his sight, God's treasuring of those that society walks past, sees as less than human.

And our call to treasure and notice who God treasures.

Light, brightness and God's care for the least, the unnoticed in our world, on this Feast of Epiphany as wise men follow a star, trust that they are headed in the right direction, to find and honor the new King, this tiny baby, the Christ child.

I read recently of an Episcopal church in San Diego, St. Luke's.

The author was their recently called priest, Laurel Mathewson, who is serving there with her husband, also a priest.

One of the first people Laurel talked to in the church was the

matriarch, Suzy, a longtime member and highly respected in this poor and struggling church.

Laurel explained:

“....Suzy told the church’s story as the story of keeping the light of Christ burning visible to any wanderers or travelers seeking his presence, even if the size of the flame was modest. The small congregation was rich in faith but small in budget, and darkness of potential closure loomed. With minimal pastoral leadership, Suzy and other lay leaders kept the light of Christ aflame in the most unglamorous ways: arriving early to clean the bathrooms, running upstairs to sing in the choir, running back downstairs to steep the chai tea spices before the service ended, mopping the floors and resetting the tables for another week of recovery group meetings. Many of the leaders came straight from working a night shift, painfully delaying sleep.” (Christian Century, December 15, 2021)

Hearing the stories of other churches has always helped me reflect on my own experiences, both as a lay person and as a priest.

While Trinity/SMWC is not coping with the “darkness of potential closure”, we all know the work and worry of doing our part to keep our dear church afloat, watching always for the light, but worrying about the darkness.

So, I find myself drawn to the image that Suzy offered for their church:

“...keeping the light of Christ burning, visible to any wanderers or travelers seeking his presence, even if the size of the flame was modest.”

This vivid image of the light in the window as wanderers and travelers go up and down Route 3/River Road, a reminder that though they may choose to stop or pass by, the light is here, the light of Christ, and the weary may stop and rest.

In this season of light with brilliant stars lighting a path to Bethlehem, with Isaiah speaking of radiance and the brightness of dawn, I find resonance with the quiet light in the window.

The Wise Men do go home, the darkness does still loom, and God still calls us to protect the poor, the needy, and those crushed by oppressors.

What Bix and I saw in the light in our window, safety and warmth, and dinner, are things so many need too.

And so, as we begin a new year, how will Trinity/SMWC be a simple candle in the window? How will we say if you are weary, lost, lonely, in need, come here and know you will be welcomed.

Amen.