

**The Eve of the Feast of Epiphany
The Twelfth Day of Christmas
January 5, 2014**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Today we measure time with atomic clocks. Using the vibrations of the electrons of an atom of cesium-133 scientists tell us that we have a clock so accurate that it is off by only one second every 22 million years. I really don't know why they didn't say 50 million years, or 100 million years ... do you really think there will be anyone around then to check on it?

But measuring time wasn't always like that. Back before electric lights polluted the visibility of the night sky people ... like the magi ... the three kings ... did watch the stars move in the heavens. Over time they learned to read the seasons, and discern where the sun would rise and set on certain days. They could navigate by the stars, and the shadows of the pyramids in Egypt and those built by the Aztec in Central America were used to measure the hours of a day. Stonehenge is but one example of our spiritual ancestors measuring time and seasons ... and celebrating the changes they brought about. The people then may not have had the technological tools we possess today, but their knowledge of nature, and the behavior of the sun, and moon and stars far exceeds what most of us know today.

Caren and I once own a vacation home in West Virginia. Our bedroom faced east with a mountain ridge in the distance. Watching the sunrise over the ridge we could see the sun travel south in the fall until the winter solstice, then it started traveling north again until its peak in June. In the same way our ancestors marked time. Those in the northern hemisphere experienced longer and longer nights of darkness until the sun reversed its course. The winter solstice was observed as a time of light returning in the darkness. This is why Christians adopted this holiday for the birth of Jesus. The timing is off because of changes in calendar computations, but you get the idea. Epiphany is part of that same celebration ... a light in the darkness as the Gospel of John says:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Today is the twelfth day of our Christmas season. Tonight is Twelfth Night ... a time for us to go wassail-ing. Tomorrow is the Feast of the Epiphany. Traditional ... in days of old ... the day before the Epiphany was the time to take down the Christmas decorations ... which, in those days, weren't put up until Christmas Eve. Fresh fruit was hard to come by back then and because it was precious it was often used as decorations for the Christmas tree. On Twelfth Night the fruit that adorned the wreath and tree were baked into a fruitcake. The Twelfth Night celebration also included a King Cake. A bean ... or sometimes a tiny baby Jesus doll ... was baked in a plum cake and the man who found the bean in his piece was crowned "king" for

the evening. The woman who found a pea in her portion and was the queen. In times gone by Twelfth Night was celebrated with crazy mixed up chaos

If you are familiar with Shakespeare's play, Twelfth Night, you will know that the heroine of the story, Viola, ends up dressing like a man. She acts as an emissary between two lovers, only the woman to whom she is carrying the message falls in love with Viola ... not realizing she is really a woman. It is indicative of the riotous reversals that the Twelfth Night play contains but also the world turned upside down that the celebration of Twelfth Night represents ... the disorder of the universe before the order being restored on Epiphany.

So just what is Epiphany? The word "epiphany" in the original Greek means "manifestation" or "striking appearance." The Feast of the Epiphany is celebrated as the manifestation of Jesus to the gentile world ... meaning those who were not Jewish. That is the gist of the visit of the magi ... the three kings. As I mentioned last week, I really don't think wise men from the east literally followed a star in the heavens and traveled to find the baby Jesus. But just because it didn't happen doesn't mean that it isn't true.

For us it is a date on the calendar ... Christmas on December 25 and twelve days later Epiphany on January 6. Yet, if you think about it in metaphorical terms, we have all known darkness in our lives not dependent upon any calendar. Most often that darkness is painful and lonely, often caused by a loss of some kind and accompanied by grief and maybe even anger. Maybe it was divorce, or loss of a job, or bankruptcy. Sometimes it is a life-threatening illness ... yours or someone close to you. At times it might be the death of someone you love. Those of you who have experience that darkness in your lives know what I'm talking about.

But there comes a time when, in the midst of the darkness, there is a spark of new life ... as if something is being born. Fragile and vulnerable that spark grows and light begins to reenter your life. What you couldn't see in the darkness becomes visible in the light ... a manifestation ... an epiphany. A return of order after our lives were forced into disorder.

Thirty years ago when my son Christopher was seriously injured in a car wreck my world filled with darkness and I ended up in depression. When my therapist asked me about the anger I held on to ... the anger I had turned inward ... the anger that had turned into depression ... there was a faint spark in the darkness. My therapist asked me, "Is your anger really worth having this much power over your life?" As I answered that question again and again the spark grew brighter ... an epiphany had happened.

I begin each sermon with the invocation that contains the phrase "the God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus." It is my belief that the quality Jesus possessed to know God alive in him is also within every human being to one degree or another. That quality ... that characteristic ... that trait has to do with our being made in God's image and our seeking to live fully into that image. The more we live into that image the more light we have in our lives. However, sometimes life throws us into darkness, and sometimes we just succumb to darkness.

But it is that quality of the sacred that lives inside each of us that keeps wanting to be born ... and reborn. That is the story of Christmas and Epiphany.

In Jesus' life people saw someone who lived so close to God that they thought he could be God. They also saw a human being that defied categories. Although he was Jewish it didn't make any difference to him if others were or were not Jewish ... only faithful. As our affirmation of faith tells us: "he dined with sinners, and lived with the homeless." And the Eucharist prayer we used during Advent and Christmas says: "He broke bread with outcasts and sinners, healed the sick, and proclaimed good news to the poor." Jesus was a light to people in darkness ... and he still is today.

At Epiphany we celebrate the divinity of God in human form being made known to the world. Yet it is an empty ritual if does not connect in some way to the lives we live. The Feast of the Epiphany we celebrate on the calendar is about the story of the visit of the magi. The Epiphany we celebrate in our own lives is that spark of life awaken within our own darkness, and then sharing that new life with the people who make up our world.

Today is the twelfth day of Christmas ... and tonight is Twelfth Night. In times gone by Twelfth Night was celebrated with crazy mixed up chaos ... the kind of world we often know when we live in darkness. But each of us lives with divinity within us that wants to be born ... that wants to be that spark that lightens the darkness. That is our hope. Christmas celebrates its birth. Epiphany celebrates its manifestation in the world. Did it happen the way Matthew says it did? I really doubt it. But the bigger question for me is about the truth it tells, and I, for one, know the story to be true. Amen.