

Sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany
January 6, 2005
St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC
The Reverend Jeanne Finan

...by another road

Epiphany is the Greek word for *manifestation*.

We hear in Matthew's gospel this evening
about three wise men from the East--
this tells us that these men were not Jews, but Gentiles—
thus, also telling us,
yes, this new king is for all people.

These three wise men
travel to Bethlehem in search of this new king.
They arrive and find much more than the king they expected—
they find themselves in the presence of God,
God incarnate in this baby,
held in the arms of Mary his Mother.
God made manifest in this infant, this very human Jesus.

And suddenly,
they are overwhelmed with joy
because they realize
that God is so much bigger than they ever imagined.

Wise men such as these,
even though, they, too, were usually court priests,
generally were considered magicians, they practiced astrology.
For them, it made sense to look at the stars,
to find a star to guide them,
to show them the way.

They were men who believed the stars were signs
placed before them in the heavens for a reason.
They were nothing like the scribes or the temple priests,
who perhaps might be considered
our modern day equivalent of bureaucrats.

Herod and his court of bureaucracy
lived lives governed by fear--
fear of losing their power, their control, their status.

The wise men have hearts governed by hope,
lives lived searching for what is true and authentic,
both in the world around them,
and in their own selves.

Look at the cover of your bulletin.

This is a reproduction of a 15th century Italian painting, *Adoration of the Magi*.

I think this is my favorite of all the bulletin covers we use here at St. Mary's.
I love it.

I love Mary and Joseph curled around their son.
I love the cow and the donkey
 looking on from the entrance to the cave.
I love the three wise men—in all their rich and glorious splendor—
 in awe
 of what they know is far more glorious.

I love those fellows in the background,
 the ones sort of looking around aimlessly.
 A couple of them look rather rough, almost seedy.
But I like these guys,
 because they seem a bit clueless as to what is happening here.
 (I love these clueless fellows,
 because they make me feel included—even when I am clueless, too!)

And I love the way the baby Jesus has his tiny hand,
 gently placed on the bald head
 of what appears to be the oldest of the three wise men.
His little hand,
 placed as if he is giving a blessing.

But what I love the most
 is that it appears that the old wise man,
 the one who has literally fallen to his knees in front of Jesus,
 it appears that he is kissing the baby's toes.

I love that.
Have you ever been so overwhelmed with the love for a baby,
 that you just could not resist kissing those tiny toes?
What a sweet, sweet gesture it is.

I love it, too, because you can almost hear the baby Jesus giggling:
 his toes have been tickled, as he gives the blessing.

God made manifest,
 taking delight and joy in each one of us,
 in all humanity.

And not because of anything material that we might bring or offer—
 this love has nothing to do with our accomplishments, our status
 or our wealth.

For look! the old wise man's gift of gold
 has been set aside on the ground.

God delights and blesses us
simply because of who we are—God’s beloved children.

The gifts we bring and offer to God
are gifts of thanksgiving and praise and celebration,
not a means of earning ourselves a place in God’s kingdom.

We use the word *epiphany* in our everyday language as well.

We use it to mean *a moment of sudden intuitive understanding;
a flash of insight.*¹

And it is that type of epiphany
which comes to the wise men in a dream.

They realize that they have made a mistake
in sharing their search with Herod.
They have no intention of returning to him.
The wise men understand that everything has changed.
They decide to go home by another road.
There are moments in all our lives
when we make decisions to go home by another road.
Moments of joy and wonder and awe
which leave no doubt in our hearts—
if only for a brief moment—
that we have been changed.

A dear friend sent me this story from the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.
It appeared on Thursday, December 15, 2005.
It seems a female humpback whale
became entangled in a spider web of crab traps and lines.
She was weighted down by hundreds of pounds of traps.
She struggled to stay afloat.
She also had hundreds of yards of line, of rope, wrapped around her body –
her tail, her torso, and even a line tugging in her mouth.

A fisherman spotted her just east of the Farallon Islands
(26 miles outside the Golden Gate)
and radioed an environmental group for help.

Within a few hours the rescue team arrived
and determined the whale was so badly off,
the only way to save her was to dive in and untangle her- -
which was a very dangerous proposition –
for one slap of her tail could literally kill a few rescuers.

Yet they took the risk

¹ “Epiphany,” *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984) page 471.

and worked for hours with curved knives
and eventually freed this whale.

When she was free,
the divers say she swam in what seemed like joyous circles.
She then came back to each and every diver,
one at a time, and nudged them,
pushed them gently around –
as if to thank them.
Some say it was the most incredibly beautiful experience of their lives.

The diver who cut the rope out of her mouth
says her eyes were following him the whole time.
He says he will never be the same.

Epiphany.
Those moments in our lives
after which we will never be the same.

Feast days help us mark important times,
both in the life of the church
and in our own lives.
It is important to remember the times
when something has happened
that has brought us joyfully to our knees
before God.

To remember that sudden flash of insight
that wisely leads us to go home by another road.

In his poem *The Journey*, David Whyte writes:

...Sometimes everything

*has to be
enscribed across
the heavens*

*so you can find
the one line
already written
inside you.*

*Sometimes it takes
a great sky
to find that*

*first, bright
and indescribable
wedge of freedom*

in your own heart....

*You are not leaving
you are arriving.²*

When the wise men went home by another road,
they were not leaving--
they were arriving.

When we fall to our knees before God,
literally or metaphorically,
when we surrender everything,
even letting our most precious material possessions
fall from our grasp,
we are not leaving,
we are arriving.

Our lives are never the same,
once we become aware
that God's hand of blessing is always upon our heads.

Our lives are never the same,
once we have knelt
and kissed those tiny toes.

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² From the poem "The Journey", by David Whyte, in *House of Belonging*