

A Sermon Delivered by
The Reverend E. F. Michael Morgan, Ph.D.
Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

First Sunday After the Epiphany
The Baptism of our Lord

January 11, 2009

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. God called the light day, and the darkness he called night, and there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Genesis 1:1-5)

We are in a new season, in a new year, and in a new phase of our understanding of how God works in the world. This is an exciting adventure we are on, and our Christian faith propels us in directions that we may never have imagined or anticipated. That is the point of an epiphany, or manifestation. It is the recognition of some unexpected phenomenon. It overwhelms us because it seems to come from out of nowhere, and it leaves us to some degree speechless, and beyond the ability to make rational interpretations or understandings. In other words, Epiphany, to a certain degree, is a great big mystery.

Some have gone to the extent of trying to describe an Epiphany as the sudden realization or comprehension of the essence or meaning of something. Well that is helpful to a point, but it doesn't quite explain why we go to the lengths we go, especially in the life of the church, to emphasize the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, and why we protract the Christmas story well into the first two, and sometimes three, months of the calendar year.

In earlier times and other lands the Church referred to the Epiphany as a "Little Christmas." In Ireland particularly, Little Christmas was the traditional name for Epiphany because until the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, it was the day on which Christmas Day was actually celebrated (not December 25th). Nowadays of course, Epiphany is considered the "end" of the Christmas season, and in some European countries such as Ireland and even in the Ukraine, it is the last day of the Christmas holidays for the nation's primary and secondary schools.

So what are we to make of this obvious shift of seasons in our church calendar; and how might we recognize it here at Saint Peter's? You will likely find, for starters, that things are changing pretty fast; actually rather dramatically, as we begin our parish life in this New Year 2009. I would like to cite a few things for you to be aware of as we go through the Epiphany season, and I would like to alert you to some important programmatic and educational plans as we approach the more somber penitential season of Lent later this spring.

One of the interesting opportunities for me at St. Peter's last fall was the opportunity to sit in on the planning for the educational series that we are commencing in our forthcoming new unit. The focus is essentially that of Christian ethics and how we deal with the pressing issues of our time, particularly, the ongoing problem of racism and embedded ethnocentric outlooks and attitudes in our daily lives. The matter of race and its entanglement with the Episcopal Church has had a mixed and blemished history; and it is to the credit of Saint Peter's that we are going to address that matter in the weeks ahead.

Most notably you will see an obvious change in the presence in the pulpit of two African American Episcopal preachers – one a Bishop, Bishop Frank Turner who will be here on February 8th; and the other a woman, the Rev. Dr. Renee McKenzie-Hayward who will be here February 15th, a priest who balances the responsibilities of leading an inner-city parish alongside her academic commitment toward understanding institutional racism. She believes that by means of building coalitions with organizations and churches like Saint Peter's, the scourge of racism might be eradicated. Certainly that vision, at the least, is a prayerful hope and dream; and it's one that I not only share, but also I know from conversations with many of you, is one shared by Saint Peter's parishioners as well. So we will have a chance to explore this complicated ethical problem in a deeper way during the season of Epiphany. Perhaps a manifestation of God's light and illumination will shine upon us.

We also will be looking ahead to the unfolding drama of God's redemptive story as disclosed in our church calendar. When Epiphany ends, we enter a protracted time of penitential reflection and self-examination. Following that, as you well know if you use the church calendar as your spiritual guide, we undergo the rigors of Holy Week, the pain of crucifixion of Christ on the

cross on Good Friday, and then of course, the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday.

And to help us make this unfolding story of God's disclosure of His divine purposes become even more meaningful, we need to take the disciplines of the various church seasons very seriously, particularly the Lenten disciplines. The genius of the church calendar is that we have a seven week time frame called Epiphany that allows us to experience numerous "halleluiahs" before we are required to express our obligatory "mea culpa's" during lent.

So our trajectory has been calibrated by the church calendar. We are on an educational quest to obtain a hallowed goal, by informing ourselves with historic materials of substance, through critical debate and discussion, in order that we might find the "means of grace and the hope of glory." We will be engaged in a process that St. Anselm described as "faith seeking understanding." We do that so we might become better Christians, more informed Christians, not simply smarter Christians, but enlightened Christians – "children" of God who are "adults" of faith. We need to struggle with issues that confront us in our personal lives, issues that we face in our civic lives, and doubts that challenge us in our spiritual lives. We do all this so we might develop a depth of character and a secure grounding in our personal values that resonate and are in concert with the highest standards of God's moral order. As people of God, we hold our journeys in faith to be dear and precious, and we honor one another as we share our mutual understandings with love and compassion.

With the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit, and God's never-ending promise to carry us forward, we can embark on unbelievably formidable yet highly worthwhile ventures. In fact, in our baptismal covenant which we will renew shortly, we are commissioned to do just that; become informed ambassadors for Christ's sake. Be sure then to join in the conversations as you can in the days ahead; in fact, starting today with the social concerns presentation at the Fellowship Hour. Your soul is being shaped and formed, everlastingly.

All this of course we ask

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