

Sermon Second Sunday after Christmas All Years 2011
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
Matthew 2:1-12
Psalm 84
Bill Watson
January 2, 2011

We gather this morning on the eighth day of Christmas. Last Wednesday evening, the fourth day of Christmas, as Nina Salmon was driving me home after the Eucharist (having locked my car keys in my office) I spotted the first discarded Christmas tree. I could hardly believe I was seeing it. No, Christmas is not a one day event or a one time event long ago. As Episcopalians we observe the twelve days of Christmas.

The story of Christmas as we have received it from the gospel writers Luke and Matthew took place over time. Mary's pregnancy and journey to Bethlehem took time. The vision revealed to the shepherds watching their flocks that evening long ago took time as well. Fortunately, having seen the vision that evening, the shepherds made a critical decision. We heard their decision in the Christmas lessons, "let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

Having experienced the revelation from God, the shepherds acted. They left the familiar confines of their hillside employment. They had to arrange for other shepherds to cover them, to watch over their flocks while they were away. They had to go out of their way to experience for themselves the reality of the Word made flesh. And so they went and in going they found the scene at the stable just as the angels had described to them, Mary, Joseph and the child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Our lessons this morning tell of another revelation surrounding Jesus' birth that Christmas so long ago. The news of the birth of the baby Jesus was not only shared with the poorest of workers nearby, the shepherds, but with another social class of persons entirely. Wise sophisticated persons from the East observed a star that had never been seen before. In seeing this new thing, this new revelation, their curiosity was piqued and they embarked on a new adventure. An adventure filled with risk and drama, to discover this "king of the Jews." Perhaps quote Herbert O'Driscoll from Synthesis p. 4.

These are persons of an entirely different class and intelligence. They confront the murderous and ruthless King Herod and recognize the danger that he presents. They continue their journey following the star and discover the birthplace of Jesus. They too discover this child of God in humble surroundings. With their keen intellect, they recognize with the true kingship and offer their gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Wisely too they return to their own country by another road.

The twelve days of Christmas are based on the belief that it took these wise men twelve days to find the baby Jesus. So our Christmas observance culminates on the 12th day, the Feast of the Epiphany, on January sixth. (which we will celebrate in a festive way, describe).

The Christmas story is of the birth of Jesus and how God shares his good news with the people of the day. The shepherds were greeted by angels and a host of heaven. The wise men were greeted by a special star in the East.

Each grew took note of the interruption in their world, the interruption in their day to day lives. And in response each was willing to change or alter their plans. And they did so not alone but as a community, a group. "Let us go..." said the shepherds. Matthew tells us, "Wise men from the East..." These were not solitary adventures, they were journeys undertaken with the important and essential support of others. Our Christian lives are journeys lived with the people that God has drawn into our lives. The Christian life is never a solitary journey; the journey of faith is always accompanied. Accompanied by God and all those whom God draws us into community with.

Perhaps we wish for such dramatic revelation in our lives. But revelation, or annunciation still occurs. Several weeks ago in our Sunday forum I read to you from Denise Levertov's poem, *Annunciation*. One point that Levertov makes in her poem is that annunciations, the revelation of God continues in our lives as well. Listen to the mid section of her poem. Read. "Those moments when roads of light and storm open from darkness in a man or woman."

Such times of revelation may be dramatic as Levertov suggests or at other times I believe they are extremely subtle and even easier to turn away from.

Like the actor in the movie, "Bruce Almighty" who ran around desperately looking for a sign, saying I need a sign, just show me a sign. When in front of him a highway dept. truck pulled out and was filled with signs. He didn't notice, because he was too preoccupied. The shepherds and magi were also involved with their lives but they stopped, took notice and acted. God presents us with opportunities to stop and act all the time. Are these annunciations?

Let me share a story. It was a cold winter evening when I was still practicing medicine but was also president of my medical group. We had a board meeting in Williamsburg, about 40 minutes from my office. Characteristically for me, I had not left with any time to spare to get to the meeting. I drove rapidly up I-64. I came upon a disabled vehicle and slowed a little, but to my great relief there was already another car stopped and assisting. I moved to the inside lane and as I looked over I recognized the car that had stopped to help. It was Ben, my practice administrator's, car. Yes, that was him underneath the broken down car working to fix a broken tail pipe. I recognized his suit.

That year, Ben had given me a book for a gift. The book was written by a physician, Richard Swenson, and it was called *Margin*. The point of the book is that we will not be healthy persons if we do not build some margin, some uncommitted time into our lives. We need to have some reserve. We need this if we are to respond when opportunity presents itself. My trip that night had no room for margin. There was no extra time. Ben had left before I had and more importantly he was a Christian of incredible commitment. Ben probably could not have imagined driving past a disabled vehicle. And there I was looking for a reason not to stop and help. The same situation yet encountered from two different perspectives.

They say that perspective is everything in life. Develop.

St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians articulates my favorite Pauline saying. As he prays for his beloved friends in the community at Ephesus, he says, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which he has called you.” That I believe is the prayer of every Christian, that we too may have a new insight and may know the hope to which God calls us.

The eyes of our hearts opened to see the hope, the opportunity that God is holding forth for us. That in this season of Christmas with all its many events, we too may find a little margin, a little space. And in that space may discover that God is at work, revealing himself and his dream to us. And that we then know the hope that God has for us. For us this day and in the days to come.