

Sermon, Year A, The Epiphany
January 6th, 2008
Church of the Epiphany, Seattle
The Rt. Rev. Gregory Rickel

I was out of town just after Christmas, until just after the New Year. You may not know this but I can see the Space Needle from my office. When I walked in after my break I noticed that the Christmas tree on its top was gone, and in its place was a flag, with a number on it. My assistant and I stood trying to make it out. I thought it was a 51. I finally saw it was a 12, a salute to the 12th man here in Seattle. This is when I knew, Christmas was over, we are now onto other things. It is good for us to have our priorities straight! For us, of course, the 12th man notwithstanding, Christmas has just ended.

I cannot tell you how excited I am to be at the Church of the Epiphany, on the Epiphany. This truly is one of my favorite celebrations of the Christian year and it is, in my mind, one of the most misunderstood, even by Christians. If you read my treatise on Advent you know my concern and love for Advent, Christmas as a season, and Epiphany. As a Rector I would play this day up no matter what day it fell upon.

We would hold the Feast of Lights and the Burning of the Greens, January 6th, no matter what. It would be similar to Lessons and Carols, a short recitation of nine readings tracing salvation history through a three year cycle which would focus on three different main points each year. Year A, which we are in now, would focus on visit of the Magi, this very story, hence in many countries, and I even heard Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York use this the other day, this is called Three Kings Day.

Our Lesser Feasts and Fasts says this:

The name “Epiphany” is derived from a Greek word meaning “manifestation” or “appearing.” Anglican Prayer Books interpret the word with an alternative title, “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.” The last phrase, of course, is a reference to the story of the Wise Men from the East.

They are called Kings, Wise Men, Magi. Whatever they were, they were most likely Zorastorians, or some other faith completely, we will never be sure of course, but I like the notion that this star, and this Messiah drew folk from all places and all thought.

The first people to hear this story would have caught the supreme irony at work in the telling, because they would have remembered what it was like, when King Herod was on the throne. Herod was one of the cruelest dictators ever to pass through the Middle East, a man so paranoid about succession that he had his own sons executed, to keep them from inheriting his throne. You couldn't pick a worse time for the Messiah to be born than "in the days of King Herod." You couldn't pick a worse strategy for the wise men than to cross the border into Israel, head straight to the capitol, and openly ask for the address of

some baby that has been born king of the Jews—adding, of course, that this baby’s birth announcement was actually written in the stars, for everyone from here to Persia to see.¹ As the singer James Taylor says of Herod in the song of his about all of this, Home by Another Way, “a king that would slaughter the innocents, will not cut a deal for you.”

The mayor of New York was on the Today show showing how they will mulch old Christmas trees in the city, and use it for mulch in the parks, etc, recycling them. Nothing would be wasted.

I liked that very much and he said in the course of it that although many trees were appearing already on the sidewalks, the Rockefeller Center tree wouldn’t come down until after Three Kings Day. Whoooo, chalk one up for the team!

Most Christmas decorations are long gone in my neighborhood, much to my chagrin. As I said, even Christians fail to understand our seasons. Bishop Rivera makes a case for keeping the decorations up until February 2nd, the Presentation, and I think she has a point, but boy she will be considered lazy and out of touch in her neighborhood!

The other two focus areas for our Epiphany celebrations were the Baptism of Jesus and the first miracle at a wedding in Cana, so the readings would change a bit each year. We would read, and sing, Christmas carols, one last time, then as everyone had been invited to do, they would bring a limb from their tree at home, or their wreath, and if they did not have one, we had two people stationed in the church to strip the limbs from the two trees that had been present in the church since Christmas Eve. They would be shaved down to two trunks, sticks only, the limbs processed outside to a bonfire in which all were sent up in smoke.

The first time I ever burned the greens, I was in Arkansas and everyone brought not just a limb but the whole tree. When I got outside we must have had 20 Christmas trees and when we lit that pile it went up like a bomb, embers were floating high into the air and then falling to rest on houses throughout the neighborhood. I was terrified. We had to dispatch people to various points in the neighborhood to make sure we didn’t burn down any homes. It was a much more tense event than I had hoped for. I did tell the people they could not fault it for being dull. So, the next year, we had only two trees, and insisted on limbs from others, and on that year the two trees we had were flame retardant trees and so they wouldn’t light at all. We finally had to resort to gasoline to get them to go up. It was a huge difference. Eventually we got it worked out, became better at it, knew how this would all work. Somehow, even with all of that, it worked, we knew why we were there and what we were up to. Nothing was wasted.

And we began to add to the tradition. Instead of simply throwing away the two stumps left over from the Christmas trees, these were saved and then on Shrove Tuesday, these were put together in the form of a cross, tied with rope at the intersection, and then placed near the front door of the church for the whole of Lent. On Good Friday, this was the rugged cross that was brought forward to be used at the altar. Afterwards, a mulch

¹ Anna Carter Florence, *Lectionary Homiletics*, January 2008.

company would come and get the stumps and they would be used for mulch somewhere, nothing wasted.

I was always intrigued by the time. It represented in our very crude and imprecise way, the randomness of life, even in the midst of planned order. This is the idea of our sacraments really. The Sacraments bring us round right again, to a center point, to some common intersection, where, if we pay attention, we are all different, lots in fact can be different, about us as a community, and about us as individuals, and yet, once again, we come to that touchstone point called sacraments. It doesn't matter if it is holy matrimony, or baptism, or holy unction, or Eucharist, or confirmation, we come to this same thing, but different from the last time we arrived. Even in weekly eucharist, much has changed in that last week if we are honest, in fact it is impossible to not be different.

And so today, we do the same. Those of you to be confirmed come to change yourselves, and to change us, to change the Body of Christ forever. After today it will not be quite the same. You will come to your next confirmation as a spectator, a veteran, part of the "in" crowd.

When you come then and to other sacramental moments, you will sometimes come with your life together, in order, all cylinders firing together. And then there will be times when you will come and all will be disorder. You may be in great despair or grief. You may wish you weren't here. But you will come, and the sacrament will be here, the one constant, there to remind us really, to jolt us a bit, sometimes in a great way, and sometimes almost imperceptibly, to the fact that we are different than the last time we did this.

I encourage you today to use it all, to not waste a thing, good or bad, to use it all. When the limbs are shaved off and you are somewhat of nothing more than a stump left there, bare, wondering what to make of yourself, don't waste that. Somehow, make yourself into a cross, for others to see, to mark their way. Nothing is wasted.

When the Magi knelt at this babies side, most would have thought that the gifts they gave were in fact wasted, why give such things to a mere baby, how in the world would it be useful for this little one, such things as gold, frankincense, and myrrh? We sometimes forget that the point of giving is not always the usefulness of the gift as it is the intention and meaning in the giving.

In fact, in a way, Jesus went on to make something of these, to use them, perhaps in ways we would not have wished for. Where did these gifts go by the way? We never really hear. The gold we never hear of again, but Jesus makes it pretty clear that our goal in life is not to go after it. Perhaps it was given away. And the frankincense and myrrh, where did it go, perhaps these were some of the spices used to anoint Jesus along the way, and to prepare his body for the tomb. His parents would not have hoped on that fateful meeting with the Magi for these gifts to be used as such. Ironically, the newborn king, Jesus, would receive his first royal visits not from anyone in his own country but from strangers. Herod sought to blot out the trace of such a king as a threat to his own throne,

but these kings search for the mysterious prince of peace under a star. The search for God knows no boundaries but remains radically open to the horizon of grace, no matter where we are from or where such a journey leads us. ²Nothing is wasted.

Let us learn that today. There is worth in all. I am sure they will not put the tree back up on the space needle, but that is Ok, we know what today is.

The gift of Epiphany is the journey which does not end at Jesus side, but only just then begins. Its gift to us is that God will arrive, be manifested, in many different and mysterious packages which we are not here to manipulate or control, Jesus himself being the most wonderful of these, and the center for us of all things, all in a very strange package indeed. One that could have been considered a waste, but with God, nothing is wasted. Nothing. At this Church of the Epiphany, from what I have learned of your history, you have been that over and over, the manifestation of Christ, to countless ones. It is still your call. Today's words in this sacrament call each of you, and all of us, to that task once again. We are called to be the Epiphany, the Christ to others. Perhaps the whole reason for the story of the Magi and the gifts they gave is to remind us, if we really dig into the seemingly absurdity and strangeness of this story, that because we belong to Christ exclusively, we now belong to everyone. It seems daunting but the story itself is about nothing less. That with God, all are worthy, and nothing, nothing is wasted.

² Gueric DeBona, Lectionary Homelitics, January 2008