

Epiphany (Year C): 5 / 6 January 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“This day, we are reminded that we too are God-bearers. That we who have received the Light of Christ now must go forth into the world bearing the Good News.”

Isaiah 30: 1-6
Ephesians 3: 1-12
Matthew 2: 1-12
Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14

What does one's true love give as a gift on the twelfth day of Christmas? Twelve drummers drumming, of course. At least according to the song. The lyricist surely lived in an interesting time composing such a list of unique gifts, and it makes me wonder: how do you store or put away a drumming corps much less make room for ten lord's a leaping or eight maids a milking. Yet, this simple and familiar Christmas carol is, to the best of my knowledge, the only song that clearly states Christmas as a season. One that lasts for twelve days; not just a day. Imagine opening one gift a day for twelve days. That's what the song implies. Personally, I've done it once in my life with a friend, as have colleagues with their families. It's a wonderful experience actually - especially if it doesn't include drummers, geese laying eggs and cattle being milked. My personal experience with the practice gave me a chance to appreciate the Christmas season in a way that focused less on the day itself and more on the fullness of the Christmas message and what it entails.

As we gather on the twelfth day, most have put their decorations away, trees have been moved either to curbside or re-boxed, and gifts put into use. It saddens me, really. After all, the whole message of the Christmas season is summed up in Epiphany, which, in turn, ushers in a new season in the life of the Church.

The word itself - Epiphany - means, in the Western tradition, a manifestation, or, as in the Eastern tradition, an appearance. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul captures the essence of this when he writes that, God's eternal purpose is revealed in Jesus, the Word made flesh. The mystery is fully revealed in Christ Jesus, the embodied manifestation of God's desire for all

creation. It is a revolutionary tale where the sacred dwells in the ordinary, thus sanctifying the mundane. The birth we celebrated on Christmas day is now revealed to the world at large – light has come and its brilliance shines forth in the darkness calling us into a new reality and relationship with God.

This message, however, is not “revealed” to the chosen people, Jesus’ kin. Rather, it is made known to outsiders, strangers from afar who journey through perilous lands to behold this extraordinary event. Matthew envisions this by portraying wise men from the east traveling according to the stars, to witness the phenomena that is Jesus. And the journey is perilous not only for the landscape but also because of the naysayers for whom this revelation threatens the status quo and normative social order. Both Paul and Matthew voice the danger that Jesus’ birth and message entails. It is dangerous because it is transformative in calling humanity to a new life of selflessness and a generosity of spirit. And people even today want to tame that radical in breaking of God’s Love enfleshed in Jesus, whose life is predicated on abundant love shared without border or boundary. We want to tame that; contain it and control it, just as Jesus’ kin wanted to do. And how do we do that, how do we neuter the message?

How many magi are there? How do we know that? (3 – a number derived from the number of gifts) Are they royalty? (Ps. 72 v11 is used to name them as such) Do any of us know their names? (Balthasar, Melchior, Gaspar – names arrived at in the Armenian tradition signifying different regions of the area) All Matthew says is there are wise men. Nothing more. That’s how we soften the message, by embellishing the narrative with cute imagery and nostalgic songs.

So, how do we reclaim the radical message of inclusion that Epiphany entails? We start by removing the superfluous narrative constructs that masquerade as tradition. Those elements that distract rather than teach. We can start by looking at the gift that is given. Not the gifts that were brought, but the gift that the magi brought with them as they returned to their homelands: the gift of Love found in Christ Jesus. They came bearing gifts and left bearing the Light of Christ and thus carrying it into the world. That is what Theotokos means to me.

Rev. Bev mentioned the Theotokos in her homily a few weeks back. It’s a Greek word used in the Eastern Orthodox tradition in reference to Mary. In iconography, she is depicted, along with the Christ Child, as the God bearer: the one who bore God into the world.

Theotokos means God-bearer. And that is what on this Epiphany we are invited to focus on. We celebrated on Christmas the gift of Love that came to dwell with us and within us: Christ Jesus. On this day, we celebrated that gift by bearing it out into the world that so desperately needs to experience God's Love Incarnate. This day, we are reminded that we too are God-bearers. That we who have received the Light of Christ now must go forth into the world bearing the Good News. That is truly the gift that keeps on giving, one we don't need to worry about packing away. The radical message of inclusion is reclaimed as we share the Love that dwells within us with aplomb, without border or boundary. That is the mystery of Epiphany that is made manifest in our lives and to which we are invited to bear forth.