

Sermon for Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC
Epiphany (Year A), January 6, 2008
Texts: Matthew 2:1-12
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I invite you to take a moment right now to look around – notice the lovely banners hanging along the sides of the sanctuary, the gorgeous blue velvet banners hanging behind me with reminders of the hope, peace, love and joy that the Christmas season brings. And look way back at the greens laced with gold that embrace the words “Love Never Faleth”. Savor these sights, and admire them because tomorrow, they will be gone.

We are now in the final moments of the Christmas season. In my family, we call this day “Little Christmas.” I often speak of my Scottish heritage, but this comes from the Irish side. “Little Christmas” is a different holiday in some traditions, but in Ireland and parts of eastern Europe “Little Christmas” is on Epiphany Sunday, the day when Jesus was revealed to the rest of the world by the wise men, or the magi. More practically, it is the day when all of the Christmas decorations come down. It is considered bad luck to take down any of the decorations before “Little Christmas.” Actually, in parts of Ireland it is also called “Women’s Christmas” because on that day men do all the housework, children give Mothers and Grandmothers small gifts, and women gather together to have parties on their own. Sounds good doesn’t it – it is sometimes very good to be Irish.

The real reason that “Little Christmas” is celebrated on the day of Epiphany is that it was the day that Christmas was celebrated before the Gregorian calendar (the calendar that we use today) began being adopted throughout the Christian world in the 1500s’. I always appreciated the day of “Little Christmas” because it gave me yet another opportunity to remember that Christmas is a season of celebrating the birth of the Messiah, and not simply just one day of frenzied activity. And it gives me a day with the opportunity to simply sit, in the quite snow of January, and be with the God come to us. It gives me a day to calmly take down the decorations, and remember the joys of being with family, the pangs of loved ones missed – a day that reminds me that even though the decorations are coming down, the light of the world in Christ still shines ahead of me and all around me.

All celebrations come to an end, but that does not mean that the reason for the celebration comes to an end. In our scripture this morning we hear of the

magi, or wise men, who come from the East to Judea, searching for the “king of the Jews.” The magi eventually came to the manger in Bethlehem and see the baby Jesus. They are overcome with joy, not only because of what Jesus was at that moment, but also who he was to become for them, and for all of us – A friend, a leader, a guide, a Savior.

The magi came, knelt in awe, and went home by another way. But let’s think back a little...what drew the magi to travel so far in the first place? Many people speculate on who they were and why they went, but we will never really know. You can bet that on their way home they talked to people about their travels, telling them the story of visiting a child in a manger and offering him great gifts. And you can bet that many people laughed and scoffed at them. But maybe others heard, and were amazed themselves. And then they go home, empty handed, with actually even less than they left with. Can you imagine, a magi comes home, is unpacking his traveling bag and says,

“Honey, I’m home! You will not believe what happened! We followed the star and, well, we got a little lost and had to go ask *Herod* for directions. He’s a real piece of work. But we found this little baby, with his mother and father, and, well, I just can’t explain it, it was dirty and musty, but, oh, he was beautiful and I felt, well I don’t know what I felt. It was, it was.... *IT WAS.... and it still is*. Oh, by the way, the gold’s gone. But I bought you this great T-shirt!”

“Little Christmas” is a day for the messengers. The magi became the first messengers of the new gospel story. Before the Jesus’ ministry, before the apostles, before the early church, the magi brought the message of the gospel to places far beyond the reaches of Herod and the Empire. They started the rumor with Herod, but then avoided Herod because they were told of his intent. Once they saw the child they were committed to protecting the him. They offered the best of what they had – and I am not just talking about the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They offered him their joy, their homage, their protection, and they offered God their hearts by letting the love that had poured into this little child fill their own hearts with joy. Through the change that occurred in them upon experiencing the baby they became messengers of God.

What if we were magi? Would we have the same strength, the same intestinal fortitude to follow the Star wherever it led, not knowing what we

would really find in the end? Can you imagine what miracles can happen if we opened up our hearts and minds and let God speak to us and through us to others? We all have gifts to bring to God, to each other, to ourselves, but we don't always remember that they are there. Christ comes to remind us of that. And when we truly look for Christ, when we give Christ those gifts, we actually find the deepest part of ourselves.

The light of Christ within us shines with an intensity that is sometimes uncomfortable. Sometimes this can instill some fear – if I love God in Christ that much, what if I am called to do something I don't want to do, something that seems so strange and maybe even silly? We are sometimes afraid that if we let that light touch us that deeply, we might get burned. So some of us try to box it in and protect ourselves from it. But, if we can, if we allow ourselves to peel away all that that we cling to that is not really important, if we lay aside all that we are pretending to be, then we realize that the light doesn't burn so hot. If we share in the simple truly human things, love and sorrow, happiness and pain, in faith and doubt, then we can know that that light is simply one star, burning for all eternity to light our way to God and each other.

The moments when I have been able to let those layers fall away have been when I am part of a while congregation singing. To me there is nothing more profound than to hear the mix of voices; high, low, shaky, secure, soft and loud. For in this mix of voices we, all together, at the same time become something else. *We become praise*. When singing my regrets for the past and my dreams for the future all fall away. I am simply and profoundly “me” at that moment in time. That “me” contains parts of my heart and soul that defy any description that words will allow. So in offering my voice, I offer the most intimate parts of myself. In joining my voice with others, I invite them also to meet me and join me in this place of giving and perhaps, together, we may learn something new from each other and from God.

Can you describe the moment of greatest adoration in your life, when you feel most intimately connected to God and to others? - Is it in the sight of a red sunset, or the moon as it peaks over clouds? Is it after a five mile run of at the bottom (or top!) of a ski slope? Is it in the quiet moments at night when you hold your beloved in your arms? Is it at the rush of a football game? We can feel this type of euphoria, this admiration of something so beautiful that it has no words, when we bring all of ourselves to the moment,

and then allow the moment to transcend all that we could imagine that it might be. And that moment is when God's grace becomes real.

The magi knew it. They brought the best of themselves, gift of riches, the strains of travel, the aching hearts of loved ones missed, and together discovered something so much more in the meager stable holding the tiny baby. They followed a small beam of light, and it led them into the arms of God.

The star is still there for us to see – it still calls to us each day to come to God in Christ and share our lives with him. It calls us to come, and to be in awe of the love and light that Christ, our star, provides. It calls us to follow that star deep within, and find it radiating from our own centers.

No matter how far we travel, no matter how slow we go, God is there with us all the way. We too are messengers of Christ's love – the love Christ has for others, and the love Christ has for each one of us. When we recognize that Christ loves us, we become new people. And each of us feels that love in a different way. Christ's love through the centuries has been called by many names and seen in many faces, but underneath it all is still the quiet burning center of God within.

When we go to that place, only God knows what we will find. But the promise we do get on this Epiphany Sunday, this "Little Christmas" is that God will be there – in the center of our being, smiling with us and loving us, laughing with us and crying with us. The promise given in Christ is that every day is a "Little Christmas" – We just need to start the journey toward that star.