

Dear friends in Christ, grace & peace...

It's Epiphany again, and the trees and decorations are packed away for another year, the credit card statements are arriving and we are trying to recover from another Christmas. It's hard for us to believe that in other parts of the Christian Church the great celebration is just beginning; the Epiphany parades with their Mardi Gras atmosphere & pageants of wise men.

In some ways, we seem to get this Christmas/Epiphany thing backwards. When the festival of lights arrives, we are too pooped and broke to celebrate anymore, and we let it slip by in silence and darkness. It is our loss. At Christmas we sing, "Christ was born for this", but then we don't quite get around to saying what the 'this' is. Epiphany tells us loud and clear what Christ was born for. The personalities of Epiphany proclaim that pretty clearly. And one thing is sure about these characters . . . they are not from town, these people who reveal why Christ is born. First at the manger were shepherds with their strange message from the angels...you probably wouldn't want one of them sitting next to you in church (a bit rough on the edges). Then later come the three wise men from afar (maybe Babylon or Persia). These guys are obviously not locals.. .. wizards, astrologers, professor types...they announce their search for a newborn king, and how they have followed a star to find him.

Then Epiphany 'fast-forwards' to the baptism of Jesus. Here we are introduced to another strange Epiphany character...John the Baptist. This fellow is not from the neighborhood either. Why else would Mark describe his strange clothing and diet? This is a hermit, a holy man, an eccentric. And he knows how to draw a crowd..just like the old tent revival preachers. His message is similar: "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins."

God uses these strange characters from near and far to break through into our world with the good news of a savior. The angels break through the dark silence of night to announce good news to the shepherds, the 3 wise men come from afar and announce to Herod that a new king is born. Now this cousin of Jesus, John the prophet, announces that this Jesus who comes after him is far greater than he ever could be.... And when he reluctantly grants Jesus' request to be baptized, the very voice of God breaks through from heaven, saying: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

God breaks through, and God uses strangers and visitors to do the breaking. We need to think on that a bit today and let it sink in. How do we feel about strangers and visitors? Do we feel they have anything to tell us? Perhaps they have a word for us from God? If they do, are we willing to listen? We know that Christian fellowship is wonderful... scripture tells us so. But we need to be careful not to let our fellowship shut out the visitor, the stranger, the person who is different. When you come to worship on a Sunday morning...what place in the pew do you choose? Do you sit next to someone you know well and are comfortable with, or do you go and sit next to someone you don't know, so you have a chance to

greet and welcome them? Most of us prefer the comfortable pew next to someone we know, and we (and the church) are poorer for it. We need to welcome the stranger as someone whom God has sent.

That is an old Jewish tradition which goes way back to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham knew what it was to live his life as a stranger and sojourner in another land. The Torah commanded Jews to always welcome the stranger in memory of Abraham and because of the blessing that the guest can be...a blessing from God. Every time I have visited a Jewish home or synagogue I have felt that wonderful welcome. This is one of the Old Testament commands that we should observe today: "Welcome the stranger". This past week I received a call from a friend whose husband died three years ago. She has moved to another city. As I asked how she liked it, I managed to ask if she found a church. She answered that she visited the Lutheran Churches first, and no one seemed to be glad she was there. When she visited the Methodist church, their warm welcome convinced her that she had found a new church home, and so she joined that church. It may be easy for us to feel that we have a friendly church, but that might be because we have searched out familiar faces there who make us comfortable. Perhaps, in order for God to break through, we need to seek out the stranger and the sojourner among us, we need to listen to them, and learn from them, and let God speak through them to us.

We celebrate Epiphany as the season of light. I hope that this time of year can be a time of enlightenment for each of us. This can be a time to read that book that has been on your shelf for too long. It can be a time to go to that special concert or play and be enriched by the experience. It can be a time to invite someone into your home that you don't know well, so you can entertain the stranger, and grow in a new relationship.

And this is a time for us to grow in our relationship to Christ. Researchers into faith in America today are finding that many people are trying to make God into a manageable friend who is at their disposal any time of the day. No wonder that many people experience a crisis of faith when life does not go their way. We need to let God break through the heavens and speak to us in this season...it is a good time to recommit ourselves to a Bible Study or discussion. Perhaps our new year's resolution can be to know God as the stranger, the silent one, as well as our friend and companion. The Gospel of Mark, the source of our gospel lessons this coming year, will show us God with a human face, will show us Jesus who comes with power. The early church lived knowing that at the end of our ropes, when the chips are down, anyone less than God's only Son, the Beloved, cannot help.

May each of you come to know this Savior better in the coming year, the one whom God broke through the clouds to tell us: "This is my son." May you come to know Christ, in all his power, in all his mystery and love.

+And the peace of God which passes all understanding.....