

Christmastide and Epiphany



After journeying for months through the desert, the Magi headed straight to the palace in Jerusalem. Where else would one look for a king but in a palace? Their inquiries must have given Herod the shock of his life! The text implies that he was an arrogant man, not wanting anyone to inherit his throne, least of all a usurper. With great cunning he sent the Magi out to find the child with the request that they were to file a report from the field.

I wonder if they felt some disappointment when arriving in Bethlehem? The star stopped over a humble house. Did they wonder if that could be the birthplace of a king? St. Matthew tells us that, *"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."* (Matthew 2:10-11)

The Greek text is even stronger: *"...they rejoiced with an extreme joy."* Extreme Joy! Exaggerated for literary effect, it sounds like words could not even contain the joy! The Wise Men fell down before the object of their worship and opened and presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

I believe that the story of Epiphany is a story of portents. Portents are things that foreshadow, serve as omens, or are signs full of significance. The star is one such portent. The star suggests that an auspicious birth has happened and a star led the way. (Whether this was an actual celestial phenomenon, as the narrative suggests, or a metaphor for some other kind of enlightenment, it was by divine guidance that they found the child.)

The gifts the wise men bring are also portents. Gold is an obvious gift for a king. The wise men paid tribute to the new ruler. Frankincense is a resin made from a shrub that gives a pleasant smell. It has been used to make perfumed oil used to anoint babies and therefore is associated with new birth.

Myrrh is also a resin made from the sap of a shrub that was used for burial. Oil made from myrrh was an ointment used to embalm the bodies of the dead. The smoke that it gives when burned is used as incense at services of burial. I wonder if Mary, Mother of Jesus, had a premonition when she smelled the myrrh? Was this a foreshadowing of her baby's death?

The corporeal parts of the story serve as signs to a greater truth about reality. God is breaking into human history in the most unexpected ways! Just as a street sign might help us find our way by pointing in a particular direction, the gifts and the star helped those who were searching for deeper meaning. Not to be mistaken for the real and unknowable thing they point to, signs can be very helpful on the journey of our understanding.

As we begin a new year I pray that you see yourself on a journey of discovery. I hope that you are generous with your gifts and use them in service to God. I hope you are willing to search for the truth wherever it may lead. I also hope that wherever you are led, there you are overwhelmed by joy!

Father Rich Towers, Rector

A Message from the Senior Warden

Dear Friends:

As I prepare to leave the position of Senior Warden of the Vestry, I wanted to thank you all for trusting me to represent you, and to remind you of some of what we as a parish family have accomplished. We provided a wonderful farewell for Philip and Kluane. We continued to do the work of the church during a six-month period without a Rector. We have hosted marriages and funerals, music programs and speakers. We have created a new website with exciting new functionality. We have welcomed a number of new faces to our weekly services and have added to our membership. We called a new Rector.

We are now challenged to support Fr. Rich as he works with us to accomplish the goals and directions we set out for ourselves over a year ago. In order for him to be able to do his job we must be willing to do ours. From the August 2, 2011 Transition Committee meeting minutes I pulled the following: "We are children of Christ, on varying paths of individual discipleship and discovery. We share a future in which we wish to express our faith by *gathering together to worship and by growing together in Christ.*"

This summation of our goals may not pay sufficient attention to how we get there. Our willingness to offer our talents, time, money and creativity will greatly impact on how we progress toward our goals. Each of us must ask the question (with apologies to Janet Jackson): "What have I done for St. John's lately?" Broadening our leadership pool is essential. Paying attention to making sure that the diversity of St. John's is reflected in the Vestry is key. Strengthening and possibly re-vamping our committee structure represent opportunities to engage a larger number of parishioners at all levels. By doing our part we are better able to work collaboratively with Fr. Rich so that he may do his part.

The new year will bring more challenges. How we arm ourselves to meet those challenges will say a great deal about our growth in faith, ministry and Spirit. Please prayerfully consider saying "Yes!" when your support and involvement are requested. Keep in mind the words with which we close our Sunday services: "*Send us out to do the work You have given us to do, to love and serve You as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.*"

Thank you for this opportunity to serve!

Lloyd

Sr. Warden

December 2012

Greeters Update--Howard McCullough

Thank you for responding to our plea for additional greeters. Training has been ongoing.

We will continue the welcoming tradition of St. John's. Greeters are always needed. Please contact me at hmccullo@twcny.rr.com or 256-5305 if you are interested. It could be a family tradition!

GOD'S WILL

Often as we pray we use the phrase "God's will be done." In the Lord's Prayer we say "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven." In our post communion prayer we ask to be sent out to do the work God has given us to do.

That is all well and good, but how do we as Christians know what God's will is for us to do? Is it the same for each of us and even if it is where can we find out what it is? Does God's will spill over from our personal lives into our religious, social and political lives? There are probably more questions that can be asked, but probably the best remaining one is how can we find it out for ourselves?

To these questions there are no easy answers for me or any one else. If I think that God wills whatever I think is right then I have assumed the role of God, putting my ideas in the place of an idol and also putting God into a small box of my construction. Probably the best way to gain some understanding is to look at the Biblical record starting in the Old Testament and continuing through the words of Jesus.

In the Old Testament the command was to love God and do justice. This was expressed as the formula to not oppress the widow and the orphan and to treat the stranger kindly. Jesus took this formula and added to love your neighbor as yourself. In Mark, God's will is expressed as being the servant of all and to receive everyone in His name. In Matthew Jesus in condemning the scribes and Pharisees says you pay your tithes and keep the rules of cleanliness, but you have overlooked the weightier demands of the law-justice, mercy and faith.

In my view the mantra "what would Jesus do" should be instead "what should I do to be in the character of Christ." We cannot just look up a part of the story and read it's answers to problems which were faced then, our part of the story presents its own problems to us, because we are in our part of the story, not theirs, yet the admonition of Hebrews 12:14 "Aim at peace with everyone and a holy life" is a challenge that if attempted will in my opinion start us on the road to doing God's will.

Submitted by Jim Johnson

Fellowship Committee Update by Bettie Lee

The Harvest Dinner on November 17th demonstrated parishioners' joy in sharing food and in each other. Eighty parishioners and guests feasted on succulent pork loin, mashed potatoes, a variety of vegetables, sauces, salads and an eye-popping table overflowing with desserts. The "people line" for choices ran from the kitchen thru the Guild room, and was frequently stalled for selection decisions.

Father Rich, returning with vestry delegates from the diocesan conference in Syracuse, provided the blessing and sent all into this great feast. The McCulloughs had taken over the kitchen early that day; Pat Clark and Joan Barnes had prepared the tables; parishioners arrived with favorite offerings in hand. We were blessed to have several youth assist with serving and clearing tables. Clean-up went smoothly with Susie Backstrom and Scott Russell managing the kitchen end, Karen Comisi keeping order and "tall guys" folding and storing tables.

There were many people involved and contributed to making this gathering very meaningful. Many thanks!

Musical Notes

From the Director of Music, Nancy Radloff

First, I offer sincere thanks to the musicians of St. John's for their dedication and hard work through the Advent and Christmas seasons. They truly helped make this holiday season special. Thanks, too, to their families and friends who supported them in their musical endeavors. Without that support, our work would have been much more difficult – and much less fun! Finally, thanks to the staff, vestry, and congregation for your continued support of music at St. John's. You truly are the foundation that makes all of what we do possible, and we are all so very grateful.

Now, of course, we're into Epiphany and, while our focus is different, our work continues. All of the choirs will be participating in Father Towers' service on January 16th, and all of the vocal choirs will be presenting *Amahl and the Night Visitors* at 3 PM on Saturday, February 2nd. This one-act work by Gian Carlo Menotti was the first opera specifically written for American television. Commissioned by NBC and first performed by the NBC Opera Theatre on December 24, 1951 at the NBC studio in Rockefeller Center, its live television broadcast was the debut production of *Hallmark Hall of Fame*. Menotti, struggling to choose a story, finally took his inspiration from a painting hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: *The Adoration of the Magi* by Hieronymus Bosch. Finally he could begin composing, but he was behind; the singers received the final bits of the score just days before the Christmas Eve broadcast. Samuel Barber, Menotti's companion and fellow composer, completed the orchestrations. Arturo Toscanini, the NBC Symphony conductor, told Menotti that this was the composer's finest work.

This is a story of hope, faith, and generosity. It begins as night is falling. Amahl, a poor, crippled shepherd boy, is outside, looking at a star "with a tail as big as a kite." He has an irrepressible spirit, an imagination that often leads him to tell tall tales – and, sometimes, lies – and the ability to see the best in any situation. His mother is a good woman who is at the end of her rope – both with their financial plight, and with her son's imagination. Short of patience, she calls him inside and tells him she's tired of his lies. Imagine her surprise when 3 kings and their page arrive during the night, telling her that they are following that star! ("What did I *tell* you?" Amahl sings. "SHHH!" she replies.) If you have spent any time with children, you will appreciate both Amahl's behavior and his mother's reaction. The kings – probably less familiar with the ways of young boys – aren't quite sure how to respond to Amahl's questions, leading to humorous exchanges. There is a lot of humor in this work, but there is also tenderness, love, and pathos. The music expresses all of these emotions, and it's easily understood because the text was written in English.

And so, I invite all of you to bring your families, friends, and neighbors to see our production. If you enjoy singing, love a good story, and have a sense of humor, you will have a great time. There is no charge, but free will donations will be gratefully accepted. And please stay afterwards to greet our cast in a reception in the parish hall.

Our Cast

Amahl
The Mother
Kaspar
Melchior
Balthazar
The Page
The Shepherds

Ezra Baptist
Elizabeth Fleming-Larratt
Michael Roman
Glenn Larratt
Lloyd Hall
Nathan Roman
The Choirs of St. John's