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“Make the Trip”

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Don't take down your Christmas trees! Don't, I beg of you, unplug your holiday lights, don't package up those ornaments and take them to the attic or down to the basement. Christmas is not over.

That being said, we all know it is, if you define Christmas in terms of a holiday season. Most trees are on the curb waiting to be picked up, ornaments are in boxes waiting to be stored for next year and holiday lights are turned off. The holiday season is over. The rhythm of our lives is clearly in tune with that reality. Remember our children that were so excited to be out of school, well they are now back to school. Your email inbox is getting fuller and fuller reminding you of meetings and reports that are due, all sorts of projects you have to accomplish. The New Year is underway; the rhythm of our workday and family lives is well in place for 2008.

But here we are on the feast of the Epiphany, reminded by the Church that Christmas is not over. We have one last opportunity to explore and understand the depth of the mystery of Christmas, because Epiphany is a profoundly rich complement to what we celebrated on the eve of Christmas. On Christmas we celebrated the coming of the Christ to us, we celebrated Christ taking on our human flesh, God in Christ becoming human. We celebrated it throughout the course of the Christmas season by giving gifts one to the other. This reflects our love for each other because of the great gift that God has bestowed upon us, by taking on our human flesh in Christ Jesus our Lord.

On Epiphany we acknowledge that this Christmas coming is **not** complete until we come to the Christ! It is such a rich complement because we are not only

celebrating God coming to us in Christ but also we are celebrating our journey to the manger.

In Matthew's Gospel, you will notice that the announcement of the birth of Christ is rather direct because the emphasis is on Joseph. Very little is said about the birth of Jesus in Matthew. What Matthew does that is distinctive is reveal the implications of this birth and this he does with his story about the pagan astrologers from the East (near present-day Iraq). The only persons to actually come to visit the child at the manger are not shepherds, not singing angels, but these exotic astrologers from the East. Pagan and superstitious Magi are the only visitors in Matthews account to visit the Christ at his birth. That gives us a sense of what Matthew is trying to communicate to us about the meaning of Christmas in the first place. Christmas is not finished on Christmas day. Christmas is complete to the extent that we, all of humanity, understand that we must journey to discover the Christ for ourselves. The pilgrim journey of the Astrologers must become our own history.

As you hear the story about exotic visitors from the east, the star, the newborn child and these precious gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh, it evokes a wonderful imagination about the mystery of Christmas. With whom do most of us identify in this Gospel? Most of us are the smug, religious experts who stayed in Jerusalem to inform the Astrologers but not needing to make the trip to Bethlehem.

The Magi came looking for this newborn child, king of the Jews, expecting that the Jewish people and the leaders of the Jewish faith in Jerusalem would know and they did. They said, "Just go about eight miles down the road, hang a right into a little insignificant hovel called Bethlehem, that is where the prophet says the messiah will be born." I don't need to make the trip because God is already a given for me, I know my God through the Scriptures and the Mosaic Covenant. I belong to the one true faith of Abraham. Why bother to make that trip?

It was precisely in making that journey that the Magi experienced for themselves the mystery of God among us. That I think is the message of Epiphany, that each and every one of us must accept the rigors of the search in the journey of our lives to experience the fullness of God among us.

I challenge you to see for yourselves in the course of your journey this coming year, the discovery of God among us, and to accept for yourselves and your families the rigors of the search. I think we all know it is a hard journey for many of us at some point in our lives. We all know each other's stories; we hear the concerns of the church each and every Sunday from Marilyn and from Joe. We

know there are people who are experiencing significant burdens including the raising of their children, care for their parents, unemployment and divorce. There is the mother who is scared to death when her newborn child is rushed to the hospital with an upper respiratory infection on Christmas Eve. There are those teenagers who begin their often-scandalous journey towards the meaning of God. What about the puzzled doubter and those Presbyterians who are struggling with their “unstable” church. My sense is that these individuals are all closer to the manger than those with established values who feel no need to make the trip.

Tim Strauman and I are part of Rebecca Leonard’s “faculty” for our high school youth. Some weeks ago I was speaking with several of them about the Magi story. They were very much in touch with the many and manifold artistic representations of this wonderful story. One of my favorites, which I shared with them, is T. S. Eliot’s poem called “Journey of the Magi.” I think it explains this scripture in a way only the power of poetry can capture. The poem begins:

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.

The poem goes on to explain the “hard time they had of it.” When they reached their destination the voice of the Magi says in a very powerful way: “Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?” “There was a birth certainly, we had evidence and no doubt.....but this Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.” Then the voice of Magi concludes with this statement of hope:

I should be glad of another death.

In a few moments we will be celebrating the Lord’s Supper and we are going to remember and enter into the mystery of our salvation. It is in this meal of memory that we evoke and participate in the mystery of the saving death of the Lord Jesus Christ. We should all always be glad of that Saving Death that gives us life and hope and strengthens us to walk the journey, to discover in the rigors of the search of our lives, the power and presence of a loving God. Our God, that we identify with, is not simply a God out there somewhere in the heavens looking benignly upon his creation. The God we identify with is to be found finally in no other place than in our journey of life. Look for that God there and take the time and trouble to make the trip.