

Yuletide Claustrophobia
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Since Christmas Eve I've been humming "The Twelve Days of Christmas" to myself with increasing determination. Although I enjoy the church and family gatherings each year with trees, worship, poinsettias, holiday gifts, food – especially the food! – treats, and the holiday movies, the twelfth day [a.k.a. the Epiphany of Our Lord (January 6)] brings with it a big sigh of relief. In all honesty, the Christmas season, sacred and secular, usually means a pronounced glut of sameness. Radio stations dedicated to holiday songs 24/7, non-stop, perky commercials on TV with bells jingling and puppies decked out in Santa hats, and the bottomless container of party mix [I like fruitcake, so it shan't be maligned] drain my peace and goodwill by the time the Magi from the Orient come riding in on their camels. As far as I'm concerned, the worst thing to do this time of year is making a visit to the "Olde World Christmas Shoppe" in Biltmore Village (the spelling is a dead give-away). Throughout the entire year it assaults the shopping public with an unfathomable amount of Christmas stuff crammed into the Craftsman bungalow while tinkling tunes deaden your brainwaves. Still, if one absolutely needs to find a dill pickle German glass ornament, it is the place to go.

I, and likely Holy Church, regain our bearings when we reach Epiphany because that blessed festival is the ancient follow through for December 24/25. It's tempting to try preserving the Sweet Baby Jesus in swaddling clothes of gold and tinsel, gorgeous angels quietly wafting on feathery wings, and no smelly shepherds to besmirch the scene. Yet Epiphany really is what we need to get that Christmas splendor and spent energy into perspective. Epiphany is based on an early Greek word meaning "public manifestation," when what was hidden or confined locally is made known publicly. That movement out into all the world is reflected in Sunday's Gospel when *wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage* [Matthew 2:2]. It's important to note that the church's standard notions about evangelism and going to tell it on the mountain had little to do with these wise individuals' arrival. Whether astronomers or more edgy, these foreigners, folks very much from Off, had already put two and two together. They hadn't come to make googly eyes at the Hallmark Baby. They came to pay homage to a king. Sages from afar had understood quite clearly that this baby has an important future, and THAT is the point.

The second reading for Sunday further underscores that Baby Jesus had no intention of staying put in the crèche. The Apostle Paul writes, *In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel* [Ephesians 3:5-6]. Those determined "to keep Christmas in their hearts all year around" will be woefully surprised if they try to keep Christ the Lord ...*in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger*. Fortunately for them, for you and me and the entire cosmos, God in Christ by the Spirit's power [a.k.a. lil' baby Jesus] never had any intention of permanently setting up housekeeping in Bethlehem.

Epiphany and the season following it is marked by Biblical passages reminding the faithful *repeatedly* that Jesus just won't stay put. Taken to the temple on the eighth day for his *B'rit milah*, the ritual circumcision of Jewish male infants, and his mother's

ritual purification, Mary and Joseph are told by the elderly Simeon, *This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too* [Mary]. Mary could only puzzle over the comment. We also hear of Jesus' wandering off at age twelve to explore and debate scripture and theology with the teachers. The boy replies to an exasperated Mary and Joseph, *Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?* Again, he left family and scholars in a quandary. Jesus, later beginning his missional quest to fulfill divine expectations, presents himself to John at the Jordan. "He who knew no sin" charts our own paths through baptismal waters into the kingdom of his father. Still later, after calling disciples to share the burden of his mission, he takes a few to a mountaintop. His disciples, utterly dumbfounded, glimpse the transfigured Jesus with Moses and Elijah. They hear again that Jesus is designated the Holy One's son, not Mary and Joseph's of Bethlehem manger fame anymore. The mountaintop vision cast in blinding light is the confirmation that Jesus is fulfiller of the ancient Law presented by Moses AND is the Messiah [God's *anointed One*]. Elijah the Prophet's special role in the story of salvation is that he would appear when the Messiah arrived. So, he did..., "for us and for our salvation," for Jews and Gentiles alike, folks from very, very far off indeed.

Epiphany's gift for all of us is that the absolutely appropriate Christmas joy and splendor we have celebrated must be transfigured in our lives, our hearts, and our minds, so that we can go out into our little corners of the world to be living epiphanies of new life in Christ Jesus. Christmas isn't Christmas if it can be packed up and stored until next year. Christmas isn't Christmas if it only smells of fruitcake and pine trees. Its songs are not only the carols and beloved tunes we hum with the radio or a marathon movie glut for a few days in December. Its story is not confined to the second chapters of Matthew and Luke. Christmas, even though it is one of the three chief holy days of the Church, only comes into its own in our everyday lives. It is the enduring embodiment of God's love for our family, for smelly shepherds and street people, the needy, for our busy colleagues, the strangers we encounter, or folks we miss who live wherever else but here. Whosoever is weary and heavy laden we invite to the feast, for that is our holy mission in this season and forever more. Thanks be to God!