

Is It the Beginning or the Ending?  
January 8, 2005

Last Friday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, was Epiphany, the day marking the arrival of the Three Wise Men at the manger. Theirs is a sojourn that began because Herod felt threatened by rumors of One being born (Jesus of course) who would eventually assume reign as King of the Jews. The Wise Men follow the stars to where Mary cuddles Jesus and there offer their tribute. It is as if the adoration of the Magi provides the final punctuation mark. Their gifts are a visual assurance of what God has accomplished by grace – Jesus is recognized as the Lord of All by those most blessed with wisdom.

Yet, having been warned in a dream of Herod's plan, the Wise Men leave so as to avoid seeing Herod again and sharing the news of the baby's birth. Likewise the Holy Family is warned by an Angel of Herod's plan and they flee by night to Egypt seeking safety. It seemed as if the punctuation mark should have been an exclamation mark, bringing the story to a fitting end – all being neatly wrapped up with a bow as Baby Jesus is recognized as God's son. But not so: it is ironically only the beginning.

In a story not that very different from the journey of the Wise Men, we have the opening scene of the Gospel of Mark, the proclamation of John the Baptizer who states that indeed the One has arrived who all have been waiting for. He describes how Jesus is a gift of the Holy Spirit and proof that we are all Beloved Children of God's magnanimous love. Wouldn't you suppose that the baptism of Christ, being that it recognizes what the people have long awaited,...that it might be the end, so to speak. Of course not, it is only the beginning – of his ministry, his life and his death upon the cross! Of our beginning as a church!

Obviously whether either of these two events represent beginnings or endings is a matter of semantics. Is Epiphany a day of holy recognition that celebrates in "lights" God's gift of salvation? Or because of frightening and threatening matters throughout the world, do we see this day as another turn of events, at the very least a new chapter born of human malice and evil intent intruding still into God's goodness? Worship only momentary; escape necessary as the Holy Family flees. Likewise the baptism? What can be a more fitting conclusion than acknowledging as the Gospel of Mark does that not only Jesus, but all of us, are beloved children of God's creation and care? It should stand alone as a testament to God's embrace of human creation. Yet, once again, it is a beginning!

Fred Buechner, the celebrated author who still secludes himself in Vermont, wrote The Clown in the Belfry in 1992. In that book, he describes an event of little or no consequence. In 1831 a church is repaired and several new additions are made. One is a new steeple with a bell in it. An extraordinary event then takes place. As written in the town history: "When the steeple was added, one agile man, Lyman Woodard, stood on his head in the belfry with his feet toward heaven."

Buechner then writes, "That's the one and only thing I have been able to find out about Lyman Woodard....But I love him for doing what he did. It was a crazy thing to do. It was risky. It ran counter to all standards of New England practicality and prudence. It stood the whole idea that you're supposed to be nothing but solemn in church on its head....It was a magical and magnificent thing to do!"

That's just the thing about faith! When you think you have reached a certain point, everything becomes topsy-turvy. It's as if we view things upside down or through an inverted mirror. Endings become beginnings and vice versa. You reach an Epiphany and it commissions you for another ministerial task. The challenges are never ending and the job is never complete. If you become satisfied, then God agitates the waters and awakens you. If you become complacent, then pieces begin to fall and you are on the path to new growth.

I like how Buechner describes this same phenomenon, in the broader, Biblical sense. "If the Lord is indeed our shepherd then...(isn't it ironic)...losing becomes finding and crying becomes laughing. The last become first and the weak become strong. Instead of life being done in by death in the end as we always

supposed, death is done in finally by life in the end. If the Lord is our host at the great feast, then the sky is the limit.”

How topsy-turvy is that? The birth of Jesus is a long awaited day. Yet, in the dawning that should deliver culmination, there is a new chapter that opens. In finding the manger, we have not completed our journey, but rather we have been invited to embark on a new and sometimes perilous road. We celebrate and then we move on. Like the Wise Men. Like the Baptist. We know that God has spoken and we are loved; but the Shepherd our Lord also awakens us to what comes next. Birth is not so much an ending, as a promise of things to come!

We are always covenanting again to serve. Testifying again and again to our desire to serve. Pointing our feet towards another treasured door, or perhaps as Lyman Woodard did....towards heaven itself. A church is renovated. A steeple erected. You would think, “What an ending to a perfect day!” Or you could think, “Maybe I will seek Heaven now.”

Faith is full of beginnings and endings and, trust me, sometimes you cannot tell one from the other. Maybe only when we reach Heaven itself will we truly be at the end. Only when there is total peace and shalom. Until then...Until then? There is plenty to do. And the Shepherd is there to show us the way. Each day we are born again. Baptized by the Holy Spirit. Marvel of marvels...God has chosen to use us, our gifts are a blessing. We serve individually, but we are never alone. We are Christ's church! So we stand in the steeple and rejoice. But this redemptive and sacred realization (and we must be eternally grateful for this) is far from the conclusion we might have thought it to be. In reality it is the beginning. Our feet point to Heaven and thrust up as they are to the sky, we lust for greater light. It is this end which is God's beginning in us, because now we go forth – bearing each other's burdens, praying for each other, nourishing others, weeping with others, rejoicing with others. Loving...always loving, in the name of Christ our Lord. The manger given us a glimpse of God's presence and we desire this for ourselves and our world! Because we desire to see the manger again, we find we are called.

So here we are. At the manger with the Wise. At baptism with the Holy. In fellowship with one another. We have arrived. So let us begin!