

Epiphany

Jamaica Plain, January 3, 2010, Marshall Hawkins

We're still in the twelve days of Christmas, but they're quickly coming to an end. And the end of these days is marked by Epiphany on January 6. And, of course, we all haven't had a church service here since last year, as we've just celebrated the new year. We have something of a tradition here at First Church to mark Epiphany Sunday and the new year by coming forward and lighting candles of joy or concern for the new year and sharing them. So we'll continue that tradition and do that in a few minutes.

The Feast of the Epiphany is the traditional time to honor the visit of the baby Jesus by the three wise men. Though it's not mentioned in the passage from Matthew that we heard a few minutes ago, later tradition gave these Magi names-Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. They were sages of some kind, probably understood to be court priests from a country to the East. Many have speculated they were from Parthia, an area where Iran is today.

These three religious leaders from another faith tradition travel a long distance to honor the birth of a Jewish prophet. That act itself would be pretty astonishing in the ancient world. But these sages recognize that an important event in another culture has taken place. They make the effort to step outside of their own tradition and context to pay their respects. Then they return home and aren't mentioned again.

What a wonderful example of cross-cultural understanding. And what a good model for us. Actions like these could go a long way toward promoting peace.

I am reminded of the Sanskrit word "Namaste," which is used as a greeting in many Hindu cultures, along with a bow. The word has a meaning something like "That which is of God in me greets that which is of God in you." It's a beautiful sentiment that is a recognition of the inherent worth and value of the person you're greeting. Though you're

different from me, I see that there is something holy and honorable in you. And there is something in you that is of the same essence as that which is in me. We are not as different as we might seem. All summed up in a word, Namaste.

And in the Quaker tradition, we see this idea as well. Quakers emphasize the inner light that is in all of us. We heard this in the reading by the Quaker Elder Robert Lawrence Smith. This light is what we have in common-each of us with a piece of God inside us.

As we enter a new year, it is these ideas that could inspire us to do our parts to ensure that this year might be marked by more peace and understanding than the one before.

The Christmas season that now comes to an end gives us a story of wise men recognizing God in someone very different from them. And then crossing the bridge between cultures to say, "Namaste." Perhaps the lessons of Epiphany provide us with our first candle of hope.

The new year brings with it both hopes and joys as well as concerns. And so at this time we have a chance to come forward and light a candle and say a few words about what those hopes or concerns might be.

May the light of hope, the light of peace, guide us in the new year. Amen.