



Faith is a Two Way Street

What a joy to gather together to celebrate The Epiphany of our Lord - and Jesus' Baptism. I'm grateful to all who stayed home and stayed safe last weekend. I did as well and frankly, I appreciated THE PAUSE from our full Advent and Christmas season - which culminated in a beautiful wedding (at Saint Luke) and a blessed joint worship service of Lessons and Carols on New Year's Eve morning at Saint Paul.

Taking time to catch our collective breath and reflect on the role of the Holy Spirit is a blessing. God speaks to us when our hearts and minds are still. I believe He is always speaking yet we may not be prepared to listen.

We can be awed by Christ's manifestation this weekend - as well as last weekend. Time to reflect and give thanks in our homes can also promote a connection with the divine.

As I discerned God's call to serve as a priest in the Episcopal church, I reflected often on "What is the meaning of Church?" Why do we need church? Why can't we just pray at home, read scriptures with our families and say grace before meals?"

We need to do all of those things to keep our spiritual lives, ALIVE. Yet when we gather in Christian fellowship, our voices are amplified. We relive the miracles and parables reflected in the books of the Old Testament and New. We apply the lessons from these ancient bible stories to help us deal with the stresses, challenges and conflicts in our own lives - and in the world.

We remember anew what Christ said - “whenever two or more are gathered together in my name, I am there also.” Matthew 18:20

On Christmas we celebrated the miraculous and precious birth of our Savior who came in the form of an infant, born in humble circumstances to a couple of limited means - yet deep and abiding faith.

Jesus’ birth stood in stark contrast to the controlling royalty of the oppressive Roman Empire. He was met by three kings who followed the star to find the baby in a manger in Bethlehem. They brought him precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and celebrated the fact that the veil between God and Man has been torn apart by Jesus’ birth. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus truly represents the love of God made manifest. Thanks be to God!

As Dr. Lee Barrett, Theology professor at Lancaster Theological Seminary writes “the bestowal of the Spirit upon Jesus is crucial for traditions like ours that stress sanctifying grace.”

In other words, Jesus received the Spirit from God the Father, through the Holy Spirit, so he could PASS IT ON!

Quoting Barrett again, “The church has claimed that Jesus underwent baptism so that we might commune with him in baptism and share his empowerment by the Spirit.”

What a concept - and so crucial to our understanding of what it means be Christian.

This week’s lessons deepen our understanding of our Christian roots.

God and Jesus know us - before we are born. As written in Psalm 139:12:

“For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

God knows who we are before we are born.

And Jesus recognized Nathanael even before he met him.

He greets him with this observation upon their first meeting:

“Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

When Nathanael questions how he knew him before meeting him, Jesus responds “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.

This short dialogue is filled with meaning, Jesus is calling his first disciples. He evaluates their faith and integrity - before he meets them because he knows us from the inside out.

We in turn, get to know Christ as we mature in our faith. If we are baptized as infants, the understanding of our faith and the love we share in Jesus is nurtured in our families, in church, in Sunday School and ideally in our community.

As we grow in faith and understanding of what it means to be marked as Christ’s own forever, we do so with the knowledge that God already knows us. He observes us sitting under the fig tree and in our daily lives.

This is a powerful insight that can help guide us through the darkness - the dark and desolate times of our lives - and give us joy during the happier times.

Our faith is a two way street - the highway to heaven was built before we were born. With God’s help and that of the Holy Spirit, we can journey on that heavenly highway while are alive - thanking God for the everyday miracles - the signs - placed in our hearts and in our lives.

God knows us before we are born. God loves us while we are alive. God is present with us at all times. Thanks be to God!

May the season of Epiphanytide draw you closer to Christ, the true light of the world.

To help us remember our Epiphany with the Lord, we invite you to participate in the practice of chalking your door. Saint Paul folks did this last year for the first time. For our friends at Saint Luke, this may be the first time they have been invited to chalk their doors at home.

I like this ancient Christian tradition because it connects our daily worlds to Christ's world.

It is among the most ancient of Christian customs to "chalk the door" on the Feast of Epiphany (January 6). (or the week after in our case)

During the announcements, we will recite an Epiphany blessing - that you can use at home with the blessed chalk.

Invite your family to gather together and chalk the doors of your home with the following initials and numbers:

The numbers 20 and 24 indicate the year of our Lord 2024.

20+C+M+B+24 is the formula.

"C M B" likely stands for the Latin phrase "Christus mansionem benedicat:" May Christ bless this house – though many claim the initials stand for the legendary names of the Magi: Caspar, Melchior, and Baltasar.

The numbers indicate the year and the + signs are, of course, a symbol of the cross of Christ.

The chalking of the door is an invitation for Christ to be present in our hearts and homes throughout the year. The process of chalking our doors also serves as a reminder that our home is a place of refuge and blessing.

As the wisemen entered the home of Jesus and found welcome, so should all who enter our homes (including ourselves) find Jesus. Our homes are a haven and a space to know and be known by Christ. (Source: Catechesis Books)

On Monday we will honor the life and legacy of the slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. He exemplified non violence resistance to inequality, racism and oppression. 56 years after his assassination in 1968, his words and his devotion to Christ continue to embolden us. His message was one of hope. His plea was for us to stand on the right side of God. I had the privilege of participating in an ecumenical service honoring MLK Jr on Monday January 8 at Mt Zion AME church in Columbia. Saint Paul and our colleagues in the Columbia Area Ministerium developed the service which had not been offered since my predecessor, the late Father Patrick Peters died in May 2021.

The Reverend Bryan S. McAllister, Pastor of Morris-Brown AME Church in Philadelphia, and son of the Reverend Dr. Patricia S. McAllister of Mt. Zion AME in Columbia implored us to remain on the right side of Jesus and live more fully into the legacy of our contemporary prophet MLK, Jr. Make Monday a day of service - at home and in your community. Your volunteer efforts can help feed the hungry, provide shelter for those without homes and make the world a better place.

That is our Epiphany message. Make smooth the paths of the Lord.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

AMEN

Amen.

