



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## ***Going back by another way The Feast of the Epiphany 2011***

**The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

On the feast of the Epiphany, we finally see the kings and camels, and even the star join those assembled in the Nativity scene. The angels and shepherds and the Holy Family come together in Bethlehem in the Gospel of Luke on the night of the birth. In Matthew's telling of the birth of Christ, the wise men from the east visit the family sometime after. These two stories put together give us a full picture of what has happened. God no longer speaks from a burning bush to a prophet but comes to live in the world with the poorest, to break bread with the outcasts, and to make God known to the nations outside of Israel, the non-Jewish world.

None of this was the way it was supposed to be. God was doing something new, something best exemplified by the decision described in the last few words of today's Gospel reading... "they went home by another way." The wise men didn't do what they had planned or were expected to do. That's what happens after an epiphany.

The idea of Epiphany is rich in theology, images, and metaphors. The idea of light is central among them, for when the idea of God dawns, it turns on the lights for us. The Gentile astronomers from the east saw the divine in a new light – a human child. In a slightly different way, Moses had his light filled experience of the God of his ancestors, the I Am That I Am. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostle Paul was blinded by the light when Jesus called him out of his anti-Christian mission. Both Moses and Paul followed a different path after their respective epiphanies.

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term *epiphany* was universally understood as a religious experience – a manifestation of a divine being. Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of knowledge as epiphanic. In 1838, he said that "a fact is an Epiphany of God and on every fact of his life man should rear a temple of wonder and joy." But it was Irish author James Joyce who brought the idea of epiphanies into the common vernacular. His stories are settings for epiphanies in every day life and he described them as "sudden, dramatic and startling moments which seemed to have heightened significance and to be surrounded with a kind of magical aura." He regarded them as "inadvertent revelations...little errors and gestures - mere straws in the wind - by which people betrayed the very things they were most careful to conceal." These epiphanies were often tinged with irony but Joyce recognized in them moments that were lyrical and radiant.

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Joyce planted this theology of revelation and divine manifestation in the experiences of his characters. "The central meaning of Joyce's works is provided not so much by plot but by the revelation they suggest of a certain universe in a certain order. These moments in which "the soul is born" (Joyce, *Portrait* 203) are seen as revelatory, either to the fictional character who experiences them, or to the reader, or both; the figure inside the story is shown the truth about himself and the situation he is in, whereas the reader is shown the whole process which, in its turn, becomes an epiphany for him." (Francesca Valente, *Joyce's Dubliners as Epiphanies*, [www.themodernworld.com](http://www.themodernworld.com))

I personally appreciate James Joyce's broadening of the experience of the divine and how we encounter it. His grounding of our lives within a dynamic divine existence shines a light on our moments and reveals God in our midst in surprising ways. It is for us to recognize them, to have the lights turned on and then find our new way of being.

One of the interesting things about epiphanies is that they can be contagious. People who experience them can become infused with their energy – like the apostle Paul, who multiplied the fervor of his transformative experience and created the Church. His experience was powerful enough to communicate itself through his passion for Christ and others were likewise changed as much as he was.

I wonder whether it is not this phenomenon of epiphany that explains something I have been curious about for a while. Bill Gates. Have you ever wondered what happened to him that caused him to begin walking a different path? His story is legendary in the high tech world of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Microsoft changed how we access and process information. Bill Gates became a billionaire by the time he was 32 and by most descriptions, was not always a nice guy. He has been the richest man in the world many years running. Then voices from the outside began to get through to him that with his great wealth came great responsibility. I don't know whether or not we can view his transformation as the result of an epiphany, but he has surely forged a new path, and with it I believe he may be engaging an important shift in our collective American consciousness. In 2000 he and his wife Melinda created their foundation and began to focus their efforts and fortune on improving conditions for the less privileged around the world, primarily through education and health care initiatives

As with the Apostle Paul's passionate approach to the formation of the Church, Bill Gates began to create some committed followers. Warren Buffet decided to give away 99% of his amassed billions. He did so through the Gates Foundation. Energized by their mutual giving, these two American icons then began to invite other super-wealthy individuals to join them. The result is called The Giving Pledge. As of this new year, 57 billionaires have



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made the pledge to give away at least half of their wealth. This wave of generosity and expression of responsibility to make the world a better place has also spread beyond the rarified air of the billionaire club. A new movement has recently emerged from many who will benefit from the extended tax cuts, who are pledging to give away at least as much as they will realize from the governmental largesse. This is the kind of thing that happens when we begin to follow a different path, to take the lead of the wise men and “go home by a different way.”

In our current speech, we have perhaps come to use the idea of an epiphany a bit too casually. This particular Sunday, it is to remind ourselves about how God uses Epiphany to get our attention, change the way we perceive the world, and even transform the way we do things. I am very excited about this Giving Pledge and the transformations it might engender in our society. What better way for God to reveal a divine concern for the poor than through a groundswell of generosity. Once we begin to see the real good that comes from this, who knows what else it will inspire. God is very clever. It's a very hopeful start to 2011.