Feast of the Epiphany  
Cycle B, 1.7.18  
Isaiah 60:1-6/Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6/  
Matthew 2:1-12

THE SACRAMENT OF  
The Present Moment

Once upon a time there was a young woman who longed to see God. Her name was Stella. All her young life Stella had prayed, worked hard, helped others, lived compassionately and generously. But still she longed to see God – to look God in the pupil of his eye. She told a wise old man about her desire to see God. The old man listened. He told Stella, Beginning tonight, go out and count the stars. Start with the middle star in the belt of the constellation Orion and count to the east. Do not count any star twice. When you have counted the ten thousandth star, you will be looking into the very light of God’s eye. And so that night, Stella went out and began to count the stars. After several hours, she counted hundreds of stars. She returned the next night and the next night and the next night. What she didn’t realize was that as she counted far into the eastern sky, the stars were revolving and turning through the heavens.

One night, twelve months later, Stella was counting aloud: Nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine. As she concluded her count, she realized that the ten thousandth star was in the middle of Orion’s belt, the very star she had started with a year before. She found her heart was filled with the greatest joy and wonder as she gazed at the star, for the star seemed to be gazing back at her. That very night she ran back to the house of the wise old man and told him what she had seen. My daughter, he explained, you were looking for the light of God’s eye. But God was there all along. You just didn’t realize it. The whole sky had to move through one complete revolution just so you could recognize what was right in front of you to start with. God moved heaven and earth to bring you to this moment. That’s how much God loves you! The eye with which you look at God is the very same eye with which God is looking at you.

The famous rabbi, Harold Kushner, author of the book When Bad Things Happen to Good People, once wrote: When your life is filled with the desire to see holiness in everyday life, something magical happens. Ordinary life becomes extraordinary, and the very process of life begins to nourish your soul. If ever you wanted a New Year’s resolution that would change your life, it would be a resolution to try each day to see holiness in the situations and people right before your eyes. Some might call it the “sacrament of the present moment” – being alert to the grace and presence of the Lord that is right here, right now. But there are so many things that cloud our vision and work against the presence of mind and heart allowing us to be so focused and aware.

A couple days before Christmas I witnessed a very un-Christmas-y event while shopping at a local grocery store. The Christmas rush was in high gear – last
minute shoppers, mounting anxiety to complete every task on everyone’s list, long lines and short tempers. We’ve all been there. I was wandering the floral department looking for a couple of pine swags for the choir screen behind me. The young woman working that station had boxes of new product that she was sorting and setting on display when a woman walked up to her and asked if she could use a pair of scissors. That’s not an item a store cashier can lend to a customer, but she offered to cut for her whatever needed cutting, and she did. Then the woman asked for some scotch tape, but the flower lady’s work table was covered with piles of boxes, paper and flowers and she couldn’t locate any tape.

Frustrated, the woman turned and started looking behind another cashier station, when the florist told her she wasn’t allowed behind the cash register. *I was just looking to see if there was any tape there; I would have asked someone if I could use it,* she snapped. Then, as she started to leave the store, she turned around and nastily called the cashier a name that I wouldn’t repeat here… and she said it twice. I was more than startled and couldn’t just stand there, so, before she got out the door, I said: *Did you just say what I think you said, to someone who just helped you… and in public… in front of others?* The woman turned around and actually came back in and snarled: *Well she is; she’s a -----! and repeated her insult again. *Wow! Merry Christmas,* I said. *Well not to you,* she retorted, as she stormed out.

I turned to the cashier who was in tears by this time. I put my arm around her shoulder and told her never to let the pettiness and nastiness of anybody ruin her day or make her feel badly. As I was trying to console her, a parishioner in the area saw me and came up to say hello. She noticed the gal crying and said: *I’ve been crying too.* Although, as she explained, hers were tears of Christmas joy because she was so proud that her daughter was going to participate in a Christmas choir. I explained what had just happened and now two of us were offering our support to the distraught cashier. As both women talked I understood why emotions were running high. Each had recently lost a parent; one’s husband had just recovered from a bout with cancer; the other had to have her beloved cat put to sleep. Our little circle of mutual compassion and understanding was a stark contrast to the insults of the self-absorbed customer we had just encountered.

Difficult times and sad moments don’t take a break just because Christmas bells are ringing and carolers are singing: *Joy to the world!* I left the store realizing that I had probably just experienced more of the presence of the Lord in those few moments than I would at all our Christmas liturgies. And the impact of that encounter has stayed with me for the Twelve Days of Christmas, reminding me of how easy it is to get so caught up in our own “stuff” that we don’t realize the impact of the things we say and do. More importantly, though, I was reminded what the “sacrament of the present moment” is all about and how important it is not to miss those moments.
Today’s Feast of the Epiphany presents us with an expansive vision -- all nations at peace and in harmony, each man and woman, each boy and girl free to live and love, darkness overcome by the light of faith and the glory of God. That vision can’t be captured in a single Christmas story or one’s favorite Christmas carol. The weight of this mystery can only be carried in small fragments -- like a bit of bread and a sip of wine, or like a single star, shining brightly in its own right, but incomplete until it joins the million brilliant stars in a galaxy. The Christmas Season can never fulfill its promise of bringing happiness to all. It can point us, however, to the One who is source of all happiness and joy -- Jesus the Lord who was revealed to the magi, giving them a moment of inner peace, quiet confidence, and ongoing hope and courage for their journey which must still continue.

So take the stories and the songs, the lights and garland, and put them away with care and even a tinge of sadness. We hate to see the season come to an end. But let the memories become your mission, and the vision become your goal.

Christian joy and hope flourish when the memory of Jesus guides and enriches our lives -- when the qualities and virtues of God’s kingdom take shape in and through our daily activities. We can think of the times when we rose above our selfishness and reached out to help someone in need; or occasions when we worked hard and met our responsibilities even when we didn’t feel like it; or situations where we treated family and friends with kindness even though they showed little appreciation. In all our daily deeds of love we can discern the presence of the Lord. We can look for the guiding light that will lead us to his glory. We can find in the “present moment” the awesome presence of God in our midst.

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