

The Church of St. Michael the Archangel
The Reverend Sally Hubbell
The feast of the Holy Name
January 1, 2012
Texts: Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21; Psalm 8

This sermon begins with an invitation to all of the Children to come to the front of the sanctuary for a children's sermon.

How do you think we learn things?

Children's story The Third Gift by Linda Sue Parks -- **How does the little boy learn in our story?**

What is the big event that the three kings, or wise men are preparing for? How do you think they know? **In the story of Jesus' birth, how do the people know that a great thing is happening with the birth of this little baby in Bethlehem?**

Do they know he's meant to be a king because his parents are rich and he lives in a great palace? NO!

- The Prophets
- Angels who speak to Mary and Joseph
- The Angels who show up and talk to the shepherds
- The Star

There were MANY SIGNS

But still, do you remember that in our Gospel passage for today, Mary needed to **"ponder these things in her heart"**? What do you think that means?

Today is the first day of a new year. **What do you think God might intend for us to learn this year?**

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"A little girl came home from school with a drawing she'd made in class. She danced into the kitchen, where her mother was preparing dinner.

"Mom, guess what?" she squealed, waving the drawing.

"Her mother never looked up.

"What?" she said, tending to the pots."

"Guess what?" the child repeated, waving the drawing.

"What?" the mother said, tending to the plates.

"Mom, you're not listening.'

"Sweetie, yes I am.'

"Mom,' the child said, 'you're not listening with your eyes.'"¹

¹ Mitch Albom, Have a Little Faith, p. 59. This is a quotation from a sermon preached by the Rabbi Albert Lewis in 1958.

What I like about this story is that it illustrates that we need to be listening with more than just our ears, and seeing with more just our eyes, and thinking with more than just our heads in order to get the whole picture that I think God is always trying to reveal to us. So often life calls us to listen with our eyes, to see with our ears, and to think everything through with our hearts. If we can't do these things, we're in danger of missing something very important, aren't we?

Today is of course New Year Day. You may know that the new year on the Christian calendar begins on the first Sunday of Advent, but January 1st is certainly an important holiday for Christians as well. It's a good time to start out with fresh beginnings -- goodness knows there are some beneficial New Year's resolutions out there, such as to avoid the cookies and sweets which tend to gather around us at this time of year! There are others -- I'd like to clean off the pile of STUFF that has been accumulating on my dresser since this summer, and not let it get so big again. I'd like to be more conscientious about talking in a gentler tone of voice with my family members.

Today is also the First Sunday in Christmas. You all know that there are twelve days to this season, and depending on which day of the week December 25 falls, there may be as many as two Sundays in Christmas, and each of those have special scripture readings appointed for their observance.

But, observance of the First Sunday in Christmas is today trumped by another holy day in this short season -- one that we observe when a Sunday falls exactly one week after December 25. So today, we observe The Holy Name of Jesus.

Mary and Joseph get more guidance in naming their new baby than most parents: they are both visited separately by angels and told to name him Jesus, which in Hebrew means "Yahweh delivers" or "Yahweh rescues". And the angel also says that this is the child of whom the prophet Isaiah has spoken, and he will be called Immanuel, meaning "God with us." So one week after their baby's birth, Mary and Joseph go to the temple and name him Jesus -- the occasion we observe on this day.

This is all part of the unfolding of the identity of this baby who has been born, this baby named "Yahweh rescues" and called "God with us". These are big names to live up to, and it makes sense that his identity needs to unfold over time. Over these two weeks of Christmas, there is a lot going on that is part of this unfolding. There is an innkeeper who feels compelled to make room in his barn for a family, and the animals move over and offer their manger. The shepherds are visited by angels, and the wise men follow a star. Journeys are undertaken to see just what God has up his sleeve. Fine gifts are given and testimonies made. And throughout all of this Mary continues to collect information. She treasures all she sees and hears, and she ponders it in her heart. You know, we're supposed to be doing that too.

I think it's appropriate that the new year falls during Christmas, when we're making sense of just who God is and how God is in the world. Every year we are all meant to have our own epiphany of sorts, our own epiphany of God's love for us, and God with us. We are all called to grow in wisdom and understanding of God's presence in our lives and in the world, and it will need to be an understanding we come to in our hearts as much as our heads.

Next week we'll start a new phase of our growing toward wisdom and understanding, when our interim, Fr. Gary Parker will officially be joining us. He's going to have new things to teach us on many fronts--there will be differences in his worship style, administrative practices, pastoral leadership and communication. As a relatively new priest, I'm excited about the opportunity to see new ways of doing things and

learning something new about running a church. This will be a time for all of us -- this whole body of members at St. Michael's -- to learn about ourselves and what we want in a new rector. Quite honestly, I think it will be the start of an adventure!

We're on the threshold an important moment in the life of St. Michael's, and we're all going to be called into a new season of learning that will require our eyes, our ears, our minds and most of all our hearts. Remember what the angels have said over and over again this Christmas, first to Mary, then Joseph and the shepherds, and of course to us: do not be afraid.

We are called to new life in this season. God is always revealing new wonders in the world. As in the days of old, the stars are alight with his love. We need only to open our eyes and our ears and our hearts so that we may follow the path he's showing us.

Remember we won't be alone for a moment. Jesus has been born, and God is with us.

Amen