

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

January 5, 2024

Year B, Epiphany (Eve), Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 60:1-6](#)

[Ephesians 3:1-12](#)

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

[Psalm 72:1-7,10-14](#)

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We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower,
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.

That's a poem called "Refugee" by the English poet and priest Malcolm Guite. It speaks to me this Epiphany with its images of displacement, of the child Jesus and his family forced to flee their homes by Herod's violence. The Christmas story is a story of joy and wonder, of angels singing and stars shining, but it's also a story that takes place here in our world, a world of war and rage and danger, the world into which Jesus chooses to come. This Epiphany story is one that mirrors our world today, as wars rage and innocents are mourned, as leaders seek their own power and prestige at the cost of ordinary people's lives, as families set out from homes still standing or destroyed in search of safety, in places from Gaza to Ukraine to Sudan to Myanmar to Latin America, and on smaller scales wherever parents make hard choices to try to protect their children or people leave their homes in search of security.

Tonight we will do an Epiphany tradition, one I don't think we've done before here at Incarnation. For many centuries it's been traditional to bless chalk at Epiphany services: chalk, that very ordinary material made out of the good honest dust of the earth. People bring the chalk home and use it to chalk a blessing over the doors of their homes, remembering the Magi as they crossed the threshold to visit the infant Jesus, praying God's blessing on their homes and lives in the new year. Tonight I hope you'll take your piece of chalk with you and in the next few days I hope you'll use it to bless whatever home is for you in this moment of your life: a house; an apartment; a dorm room; a car, a friend's house, a shelter, a tent; a place you've lived in for many years or a place you might just stay a single night.

Homes are a gift. Yet at Epiphany we celebrate not so much the idea of home as a place of refuge and safety from a dangerous world as the idea that we are a pilgrim people whose only true home is God. The Magi left their homes in the East to follow God's call on a mysterious pilgrimage. In doing that, they followed in the footsteps of Abraham, the great ancestor of Jews and Muslims alike, who heard God calling him to leave his home in Mesopotamia and seek a new life in a mysterious Promised Land. Later Abraham's descendants would move in a time of famine to Egypt, only to be enslaved, liberated by God, and to become a pilgrim people once again, wandering through the desert forty years. When God's people were conquered and sent into exile in Babylon God set them free again and brought them on another pilgrim journey back to the Holy Land. Jesus left his own home in Nazareth to travel through Galilee and Judea sharing God's love, and after the resurrection he sent his followers to spread that love to the ends of the earth.

Where is home for you? Is it a place, a feeling, a particular group of people? Are there homes you have lost, homes you have found, homes you have made, temporary homes? Tonight we celebrate a God in Jesus Christ who is at home with us, who has made his home with us, and who moves along with us on our life's journeys. Jesus knows what it is to be displaced, what it is to be sent out on mission, what it is to give and receive hospitality, what it is to gather people together into community. He is our companion along the way, and he is our eternal home.

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Announcements:

- Thanks to Diana, Diane, Barbara, Catherine Priestley, Lauren Cole, and others who made our dinner tonight
- Morning: Paul Mallatt's ordination
- Sunday: Baptism of Christ, following Sunday our Annual Parish Meeting