

The Feast of Epiphany ~ Year A
January 6, 2008, 6:00 PM Service
The Reverend Dr. Howard J. Hess

“What A Difference A Year Makes”

Introduction:

What A Difference A Year Makes! We have come full circle tonight at Church of the Ascension. God's light has led us from Epiphany 2007 to Epiphany 2008 to both a new and yet a familiar place. For that, we are grateful and we are blessed. Last year at this time, I had not yet met most of you and had not had the privilege of actually visiting the Church of the Ascension. What I had heard was that tremendous change had unfolded here and that understandingly there was apprehension about the future of the parish. At the same time, there were positive signs emerging at Ascension: exceptional lay leadership had stepped forward, a creative multi-faceted 50th year long anniversary celebration had been launched and two top notch wardens were continuing at the helm. Then, from a distance, I began to hear reports of what sounded to me like signs of resurrection at the Church of the Ascension. The first sign, Bishop, was the special Epiphany service a year ago in which you celebrated and preached. The service was described as a powerful experience of God's presence at Ascension. As it was described to me there was a vitality and beauty in that service that began to renew the hope of many parishioners. God had begun a new work at Ascension and on that Epiphany began to shed light on what that new work would look like. Thank you, Bishop, for being with us again a year later as we continue to explore where God's light is taking us at Ascension, and thus become together increasingly clear about the next chapter of our story.

Our Next Year. Now there is no question that we enter into our next year needing to continue to assess who we are as a parish, to reaffirm our unique call to ministry and to continue to solidify the base of who we are as a Christian community. At the same time, I believe that we are ready to join the wise men (and women) who have gone before us and explore where God is calling us to go forth more fully into the world around us. I first had this insight during my recent trip to officiate at a burial service for a close friend of ours in St. Peter's church in the village of Yaxley, just outside of Peterborough. While there, I had the privilege of visiting with the Reverend Ian Crowley, Vicar of St. Peter's. He shared with me that in their Deanery of 16 churches, their total average Sunday attendance in all their churches rarely exceeded 800 members. Many of these were the very elderly. Next year they were reducing the number of priests in their Deanery from 15 to 7 ½. In order to make ends meet, they were selling church property, including the vicarage of St. Peter's. I returned to Ascension the next Sunday and looked out at a congregation here of over 350 people, and I thought to myself—I wonder if we have a full understanding of how alive

and vital and dynamic we are at the Church of the Ascension and how much potential we have here to help build the Kingdom of God in Knoxville, Tennessee, and beyond. I remember thinking: “The Holy Spirit is active here and energizing our church and that we are in an excellent position to fulfill Christ's directions about both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. More on this later. The next chapter of our story at Ascension is waiting to be written and an exciting chapter it will be.

And this One Thing I Know About Our Ascension Story: Our story is unique and at the same time it is one part of a larger Christian history that lives over space and time. This history is rooted in the narrative of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and enlivened by the life stories of our Christian brothers and sisters. The story of the Wise Men is not just a traditional part of the lovely Christmas story—it's about persons from a far away place on a journey of faith to discover the Incarnate Christ. In the process they experienced an Epiphany. We too in this coming year need to be open to God's Epiphany for this parish. How would God have us use most fully the wonderful physical space God has given us; how would God have us to offer a spiritual home to the families around us who search but haven't found that home yet, how would God have us create vital ministry opportunities for those who join us and who will God bring as new clergy to help lead us in this next year. Hang on, my friends, we have spotted the light and we are going together in search of the Incarnate Christ; we have mounted our camels, and we are on the move. Thanks be to God. Amen. Brothers and sisters, God has left the light is on for each one of us and God has left the door open. Our task is to see the light, and let it guide us home. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*