

My favorite local news story of the past couple of months is without a doubt that of Brad the ram who went on the lam. Remember? In November, Brad came to the attention of locals in our area. He was an Icelandic sheep, raised on a small farm in Carlton. He was sold to a couple in Two Harbors, but while being transferred to his new pen, he escaped and went on the lam. For 3 weeks, he evaded capture, wandering at least 40 miles from Two Harbors, down the North Shore, through Knife River, through Duluth, into Proctor, and was finally captured a mere 5 miles from his original small farm in Carlton. To the best that anyone can figure, Brad was trying to return home. And home, back in Carlton, is where he is now residing. His 3 weeks of fame in November were a welcome reprieve from tensions surrounding our national elections and warmed hearts all over the state and even nation. We do hear stories of dogs or cats returning to their homes over distances at times, but this was the first time I'd heard a sheep story. This story reminds us all of how strong that homing device within us all can be; the pull of home is powerful. Many of us may have returned to our home area or had guests come to their home during the recent holiday season, because as the song says, "There's no place like home for the holidays". In special times, but also in the dailiness of our lives, home draws us in. But "home" can have a variety of meanings for us; it's a metaphor with great depth. We may have more than one home, perhaps a home somewhere warm for the winter, and a home along the North Shore for the rest of the year. We may feel *at home* in the homes of friends or family members. We may find our church to be a home, a place where we can truly be ourselves and experience warmth and acceptance. We may associate home with memories of where we grew up, and whether or not that home still exists in the same way, it still exists in our hearts. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his followers, "Abide in me, as I abide in you." Jesus speaks of our abiding in Him, of our making our home in Him, and certainly we experience a sense of homecoming in our relationship with God. Our text today is about, among other things, *home and homelessness*. The Magi in our text leave *their home* and comfort zone to travel and pay homage to Jesus, now established in a home with his parents in Bethlehem. Shortly after the Magi leave, the Holy Family will be *homeless* refugees, fleeing to Egypt to avoid the wrath of Herod. The Magi will return to their original homes, but as changed people, while the

Holy Family will eventually return to their home town of Nazareth to raise Jesus and the rest of their children, once the threat of Herod has ceased. Let's reflect on this colorful and mysterious story and on its relationship to the theme of home and homecomings.

This morning we are entering the season of Epiphany, which officially begins tomorrow on January 6, so we're ahead of ourselves by a day. This is the season of revelation and light, epitomized by the journey of the Magi, and continuing for the next several weeks with lessons featuring miracles of light and revelation. To have this emphasis of light at this time is certainly appropriate for us in our hemisphere. At no other time of the year can we appreciate this liturgical season of light as deeply as we can now, when darkness so dominates every 24 hour period. Tomorrow, or possibly today, the church *around the world* celebrates the arrival of the magi, or wisemen, to worship the baby King. This is an event filled with light and revelation. In this visit from exotic foreigners, Christ is symbolically made visible to the *world*, not to just a few Jewish shepherds and townsfolk, as happened on Christmas. To clear up any confusion about who all was crowded into the stable on Christmas Eve, we might picture in our minds the typical Nativity set, or our Knife River Live Nativity for that matter. As you recall from Julebyen, our camels were the hit of the live Nativity, being frisky and exotic, and it's certainly possible that the Magi from the East, possibly Persia, rode on camels. However, contrary to our live Nativity and every Live Nativity and Nativity set, there is no Scriptural claim that the Magi arrived on Christmas Eve, alongside the shepherds. They came later....12 days later in the liturgical season, perhaps as long as two years later, in the Scripture. The gospel of Luke fills us in about the actual birth, with angels and shepherds, and we heard that on Christmas Day. But the gospel of Matthew tells of us the coming of the Magi, our text today. We are told that it is "after the birth of Jesus" and that they "enter the house" of the Holy Family. In other words, the couple and their baby have settled in Bethlehem and are in a house by the time the Magi arrive. Since the Magi, like ourselves, were not Jewish, but Gentiles, *their* seeking and finding of the Christ child is representative of *our* seeking and finding the Christ child. Because of that, while we certainly we can find ourselves at the manger with the Shepherds, even more so, we can find ourselves with the Magi in the this humble little house, come to worship the new born King. They were bringing gifts to the Christ child, but

also receiving a gift from the Christ child—the love of God enfleshed in Christ, the Light of the World among us. This light of revelation will dominate this church season of Epiphany, which lasts through the first Sunday of March. We might think not only of the light of the star that led the Magi, but we might also remember throughout this time the Maker of stars and how star light affects us—not only in the beauty of stars against dark, winter skies, but in the blazing star light that enlightens each day for us, which we call “sunlight”. There are so many ways and places through which we encounter God’s revelation and God’s light, but one of the ways that this event of the Magi holds up for us is that we encounter God’s light or revelation within our *homes*. Just as the Magi encountered Christ in *his home*. Matthew writes that when the magi saw the shining star stop overhead, they were filled with joy. I quote, “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother”. Doesn’t that create a picture in our minds? In *his* home, Christ was encircled by family and friends. The same can be said of *our* homes: Christ is met in our homes, in family and friends, in visitors and strangers. In our homes, faith is shared, nurtured, and put into action. In our homes, Christ is welcome. In our homes, we experience epiphanies of faith, moments when God’s light is revealed to us in daily, small ways. Which is one of the reasons that homecoming is such a powerful experience for us---it’s not just about returning to a building, it’s about returning to where we have experienced the goodness of God. Which is maybe why everyone, even Brad the Ram, seeks their home. As we are celebrating First Communion for 4 of our children this morning, it is especially appropriate that we emphasize this role of home in faith. These children are loved and nurtured in their church home, right here among us; but they are *also* loved and nurtured in their *own* homes, and so much of our faith development happens through our families. We might even think specifically of the role of meals, both within our homes and within our church home. I hope that mealtime in our homes is a time of gathering, the asking of a blessing, and the sharing of food and conversation. Holy Communion is precisely that equivalent here in our church home, where we gather, ask God’s blessing, share in the food of angels at the altar, and then share in conversation and food afterwards as well during cofeetime. Holy Communion means so many things for us, but among those meanings is *homecoming*. When we receive bread and wine from Jesus, we are welcomed home. And take notice that we *receive* the bread and wine; that was emphasized in our First

Communion class. We *don't earn* this Holy Meal; we *receive* it simply, through the grace of God. And the physical way we symbolize that is by receiving the element of the bread or wafer with an open hand, symbolic of our open heart. *It's pure gift.* As we said, the Magi brought gifts to Jesus, but they *received* the gift of God's love. That's why this festival of Epiphany is such a perfect Sunday for First Communion. The theme of receiving gifts! Holy Communion is about our receiving the gift of God's love, in our church home. That's such a treasure for us, to know this sacred space as our home, where we receive God's holy meal and holy love. And such is the generosity of God, that we receive God's love within our familial home as well.

Because of this emphasis on the home of Christ in this story, in many parts of the world, blessings for the home are done on or around the Festival of Epiphany. We often think of blessing a new home when we move into it, but why not practice an annual blessing of our homes? The fact that Jan. 6, the date of Epiphany, falls so close to Jan. 1, the New Year, makes it an especially appealing time to bless our homes for the New Year, in honor of the Magi's visit to Christ. So here's how you could go about this: A visual blessing may be inscribed with white chalk above the main entrance to your home; for example: 20 + CMB + 25. The numbers on either side change for the year, and the three letters stand for either the ancient Latin blessing "Christe mansionem benedica," which means, "Christ, bless this house" or the legendary names of the magi, "Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar". This prayer could be prayed: "Christ bless this house and remain with us throughout the new year."

And on the off chance you won't remember this, it's printed in the bulletin, so you could take that home and use it some time today or this week. To do so would be a way to draw our attention to the daily revelations and epiphanies we need to lighten and brighten this dark and cold time of year. It would also be a way to bring some of the mysterious and exotic quality of starlight into our own homes, where God is revealed to us in the tasks of our daily lives. We spend most of our time in our homes, involved in the daily-ness of living. If we don't discover God's light there, then where will we find it? God's goodness and grace are present where ever we are, but especially in those places that are a home to us.

In closing, I'd like to share a Gaelic blessing with you that I received on a Christmas card as we begin this New Year and this season of Epiphanies and starlight:

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you,

Deep peace of the shining stars to you,

Deep peace of the gentle night to you,

Deep peace of Christ the light of the world to you.

Amen.