

Column

Time is a curious thing. Like watching a train at a crossing, it just keeps moving down the track; except, for those who observe the Christian Year, the path of this train is circular rather than linear.

In this respect, it's rather like those model trains so coveted by young boys at Christmas time. It just keeps going round and round. It begins in late November with Advent, passes through the major events in the life of Christ and then enters a long 20-plus week season focused on applying the teachings of Jesus. Once that is completed, the train of the church year arrives back at the station from which it began – Advent – and the journey begins anew.

Rather than being monotonous and stultifying, its predictability brings structure and comfort to life. We see new things out of the window of this train each time we make this journey. Our understanding of God's great story and our place in it enlarges. More like the Master we become, or at least that should be the goal.

By the time you read this, we will have passed through Advent and Christmas. The next station is Epiphany (Jan. 6). It won't be as familiar to many as the first two, but it is an important one.

'Epiphany' is about God's light and glory bursting into the world with the coming of the promised Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Those who walked in darkness – in particular those outside the family of Abraham – were given entrance into the household of God's people. "As many as received him [Jesus], to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name," says John in the prologue to his Gospel (1:12).

The first non-Jews to come and bend the knee before the newborn King of the Jews were astrologers from the East. They likely came from Persia (modern day Iran). They may have been the first, but certainly not the last. By the time the New Testament closes, the news about this other King was busily going throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. People of all races and places were coming to the light of Christ.

If you think about it, Epiphany is nothing more than the Christmas story continuing and expanding, a phenomenon that is still going on today. Indeed, you

and I are called to be a part of this process. In the words of the Vacation Bible School song, we are “to brighten the corner where we are.”

One person who did just this was the actor David Niven. Christmas 1939 found Niven away from Hollywood and back in his native England, a second lieutenant in the British Army. As he tells the story in Guidepost magazine, it was Christmas eve and the 40 men in his platoon were not very happy about being put up in the shabby stables of a farm near Dover. Nor were they pleased about being commanded by a hotshot actor. At times, the air was peppered with caustic remarks.

Before turning in for the night, Niven made the decision to continue his long-standing practice of kneeling for a prayer. As he did, he heard some snickering in the background, but after lying down on his straw bed, he glanced around and saw a dozen or so men on their knees praying quietly.

The light that began to shine 2000 years ago over a stable continues to shine and pierce the darkness of this world. Niven was a conduit of that light. You can be as well. Epiphany is now!

O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people who call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the First Sunday after Epiphany, Book of Common Prayer).

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