



**“The Gift of a New Perspective”**

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Matt. 2:1–12 (NRSV)***

This past Thursday, January 6, Christians around the world celebrated the Feast of Epiphany and headed into a new season with the same name. Since I am a festive person, and we are a congregation that gathers from around the Bay Area, at Eden we celebrate this occasion—which often falls midweek—on the weekend closest to the day. In 2011, that weekend is this weekend.

Epiphany is known by several names. The name most commonly used depends on one’s denominational affiliation, geographic location, and ethnic identity. Some call it “Twelfth Night.” Others call it “Three Kings Day.” And still others simply say, “Epiphany.”

Epiphany is sometimes called Twelfth Night because it falls twelve nights after Christmas. Remember the song, “The Twelve Days of Christmas”? Its theme is based on the twelve days in the season of Christmas. Epiphany is also called Three Kings Day because it is a celebration that commemorates the visitation of the magi, sometimes known as “the kings.”

The way that Christians celebrate Epiphany varies around the world. Most Western European cultures emphasize the baptism of Christ on January 6, while Germans, Brits, many Latin American cultures, and many Eastern and Russian Orthodox Christians celebrate the visitation of the magi on January 6.

Regardless of denominational practice and ethnic culture, the theme common to all Christian cultures with respect to Epiphany is our belief that God is revealed in Christ. Through Christ’s birth and life we are offered an epiphany—a revelation of the divine.

II

In cultures that emphasize Jesus’ baptism on and during Epiphany, infants and believers are baptized on the Feast of Epiphany, and congregants are invited to renew their baptisms. That renewal invitation typically comes with a sprinkling of water for the entire congregation by the priest or pastor as she moves about the sanctuary shouting, “Renew your baptism!” For more on this theme, come back next Sunday.

Some notable departures from the dominant practice in Western Europe of emphasizing baptism include the way that Germans and Brits celebrate the visitation of the magi on Epiphany.

My cousin Elke Kreutzfeldt explained to me the last time I visited her in Deutschland that German children go from house to house on Epiphany eve, singing carols and chalking the year and initials KMB (Kaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar) near the entrance of each home they visit. The festive *Dreikonigskuchen*, or Three Kings Cake, is also served on Epiphany eve to celebrate this occasion. I was so sorry that this tradition didn't get carried across the Atlantic by my Grandpa Nehring or Great-Grandpa Thomsen. I would have loved being given permission as a child to write on the sidewalks.

Like Germany, England also celebrates Three Kings Day, but Brits do so with three cakes (one for each king) which are baked and shared among revelers. Before the cakes are put in the oven, the baker secretly stirs a dried bean into one of the three cake pans. The bean symbolizes the baby Jesus. Hiding the bean is reflective of the flight to Egypt described in Mathew's gospel, when Jesus' family hid from King Herod. Whoever finds the bean in her or his slice of cake receives a special prize.

Epiphany is an even more festive event among Filipinos. For example, Christians on the island of Cebu, which is the central part of the archipelago, celebrate the Feast of the Santo Niño (the Feast of the Holy Baby Jesus) during Epiphany.

When I was about 25 and serving at The Old South Church in Boston, I took twelve college kids on a mission trip to remote islands off the coast of Cebu City. Before we began our work, we spent the first night in Cebu City enjoying the Feast of the Santo Niño.

For the uninitiated, it is helpful to know that this celebration includes a parade, street fairs, dancing, face painting, and street revelry. The best way to describe the Feast of the Santo Niño for Americans is to say that it's a cross between the Rose Parade in Pasadena and *Carnival* in Rio de Janeiro!

At the reunion that our mission group held a few weeks after we returned from the trip, the students presented me with a framed photo of our group. The students were covered in grease paint and looked like Indians in a 1950s Hollywood Western.

A year or so after I returned from that trip to the Philippines, I was asked to serve as a liaison between my church and The Hispanic Community Church of Boston, which was a new church start. Two of my seminary friends, Freddie Fuentes and Pablo Diaz, were the founding pastors of that congregation. The three of us were very idealistic and energetic, and we had a lot of fun together. During my experiences of working with Freddie and Pablo's church, I learned more about Three Kings Day celebrations in Puerto Rico, New York City, and Boston.

### III

My experience of working with Pablo and Freddie and the important ministries that grew out of their congregation infused my vision of what our Eden-Cherryland Three Kings Day celebration might become. The idea here started with plans to hold a holiday party for the leaders and families involved in Eden-Cherryland COR, which includes members of our church and parent leaders from Cherryland and Longwood Elementary Schools in Hayward.

The idea started small and got bigger. In the end, the results yesterday exceeded my imagination for what was possible with a planning committee of three that met once, started working in the middle of Advent, with no budget, and our less-than-flawless capacities to speak each other's primary languages.

Despite our challenges, our small group—like the leaven in the loaf that Jesus described (Mt. 13:33)—rose up and became a planning, shopping, cooking, chopping, baking, schlepping, food-salvaging, and present-gathering group of 15. By the end of the day yesterday, somewhere in the range of 50 people and 3 community groups had a hand in making our celebration a huge success for the 75 children who attended with their 25+ parents and grandparents. Our community partners in this endeavor included Tiburcio Vasquez Healthcare Center (TVHC), Hope 4 the Heart, and Cherryland Community Association.

Hope 4 the Heart is a food bank located by the old cannery in Cherryland, and TVHC is our local community clinic, which is headquartered on Mission Blvd. Both of these organizations were beneficiaries of our Candlelight Carols programs a few years back.

TVHC is also the organization that Eden's Youth Group held the bike-a-thon event for a couple of summers ago, and donated children's books for the reception area. Eden Church and Eden-Cherryland COR has worked for many years with TVHC on healthcare reform, and together we continue to advocate for more affordable and accessible health care clinics in the Ashland-Cherryland area. Recently I was also asked to serve as the faith community leader on TVHC's new community collaborative to reduce teen pregnancy in our community.

The Cherryland Community Association, which is another collaborator with Eden-COR, has helped Cherryland Elementary School develop their bicycle safety program and provided new landscaping around the school yard. They also sponsor the community gardens program in Cherryland.

In case you missed the party yesterday, here's a quick recap of the festivities:

With a referral from FESCO, I asked Pam Winthers to seek food donations for a food giveaway to our Three Kings Day participants from Hope 4 the Heart. Hope 4 the Heart responded with a generous donation of two carloads of groceries that Pam picked up

and delivered to the church on Thursday. She and John Bulette and Kathy Miller unloaded the food into the Norberg Room.

Thursday evening, Drew Nettinga, Pam, and I sorted and salvaged 50 grocery bags of food, and topped off the grocery bags with Eden UCC Frisbees which were donated by one of our church families. Saturday morning, Peggy and Dan Apperson and Eleanor O’Keefe, along with some other Castro Valley High School alumni, ferried all 50 bags into Oliver Hall and put them around the Christmas tree.

About a week ago, Stephanie Spencer started consulting with Coco Ramirez from our Eden-Cherryland LOC about the groceries needed for our menu, and comparing prices so that we could make traditional Mexican food for Three Kings Day. On Wednesday and Thursday evenings, and most of the day on Friday, Stephanie became our personal shopper for the event. Ask Stephanie anything about the Cherryland and Hayward mercados and party stores. She has been to all of them, and can tell you about the prices and quality of products at every store.

Friday evening around 4:30 p.m., Pam, Coco, and Theresa and Angelina Collier started the three-hour process of picking seeds out of great mounds of dried California and New Mexico red peppers. Coco brought commercial-sized pots to cook in which she brought from home and borrowed from her sister.

Stephanie went home to fetch our blender and Cuisinart. Coco went home to check on her family and to gather her three youngest children and Imelda De la Cruz, another of our LOC leaders, and bring them back to church to cook. Together, six women, two girls, and—did I mention a pair of three-year old twins—made *pozole*, *rosco de reyes*, and *ponche*.

*Pozole* is a red pepper soup made with pork and hominy. *Rosca de reyes* (translated “the kings’ crown” is a sweet holiday bread. And *ponche* is a warm stewed fruit punch with apples and Jamaica flowers, guava, hawthorns, fresh sugar cane, tamarind, and cinnamon sticks. The closest approximation to *ponche* for gringos is probably hot mulled cider.

While the other cooks were focused on the main entree, I started making the *rosca de reyes*? “Why me,” you ask? I was asking that myself. The answer is that we agreed it would be cheaper to buy the groceries and make the *rosca* ourselves rather than buy it in the grocery store. When I agreed to this plan, I assumed that one of our Cherryland *madres* would know how to make it. I’m sure many do, but as it turned out, when I asked how to make it, the women on our crew (who were my age) just shrugged their shoulders and said, “We don’t know. We buy it at the store!” They are all modern women.

“OK,” I said. I’ll do what Pedro does when he wants to learn something. I’ll Google that. So I did and came up with a recipe written in English for an individual *rosca*, and then simply quintupled it.

Note to self: Try not to make anything for the first time in quantities to serve over 100. Reality—I didn't really have a choice.

We promised *rosca* to our neighbors, and our budget wouldn't allow for the store-bought version. I read the recipe and took heart in the thought that it was similar to Swedish tea rings that I learned to make with my Grandma Nehring as a child.

I got the bread started, and let it rise. After supper Friday night, Lupita (one of Coco's daughters) and Angelina (Theressa's daughter), and I rolled out the dough and made the rings/crowns, and decorated the crowns with dried fruit. Yesterday before serving, Eleanor O'Keefe and her pals frosted the rings and added more "jewels" to the crowns.

Long before the food was served—starting at 9:30 a.m.—Coco, Imelda, Drew, Stephanie, Pam, Theressa, and Laura—all from our COR crew—arrived at the OHK to chop cabbage, lettuce, radishes, onions, and limes to go with the *pozole*. Throughout the day, reinforcements from Eden-Cherryland COR and Eden Church, with their extended families, and people who had never attended a COR event at Eden (including our own members) arrived to celebrate and support this unfolding event.

As the children and their families arrived at Oliver Hall, Alejandra Rosas and Santiago Rosas-Romero welcomed visitors, distributed activity books that Stephanie procured from a local discount store, and handed out jump ropes donated by TVHC's healthy children's program.

Pedro Ramos-Goycolea was our emcee and host for the program. He announced our *los tres reyes* (Three Kings) art contest. (While you're getting food at the potluck today, enjoy the children's art gallery posted on the Oliver Hall wall along the buffet table. I promise you that it is a feast for your eyes!)

Before lunch, we played a couple of rousing rounds of *lotería* (Mexican animal bingo), decorated the sidewalks with chalk art, jumped rope, and played in the courtyard with our lawn games and on the play structure in the Tot Lot.

After lunch, Pedro and Herman Barahona made a couple of speeches, thanked the cooks, and reminded the children of the Christian principles for enjoying the piñata. Eleanor, her friends, and Dr. Joel Garcia from TVHC helped distribute 80 gift bags filled with candy, cookies, peanuts, pencils, pencil sharpeners, and stress balls to the participating children. The adults were encouraged to take home a bag of groceries from under the Christmas tree.

By 4 p.m., Coco, Imelda, Laura, and Stephanie—and our "closing crew"—which included Sylvia Meraz and her extended family, Mary Haro, and Pepper and Scott Swanson—cleaned up and reset Oliver Hall and the Oliver Hall Kitchen for our Epiphany celebration today.

"How was that possible?" I asked myself last night as I pulled the covers over my head.

The answer, I realized, is very simple—miracles still happen. Miracles still happen, because modern magi are willing to travel from distant places to see what all the Christmas fuss is about. They bring their gifts—gifts of openness to new people and new possibilities—and they receive a gift—the gift of a new perspective. As a result, they/we are profoundly changed, and nothing in the world is ever the same. Thank God. Amen.