

## **Messages for latecomers at the manger**

**By Bishop Paul V. Marshall**

**January 2006**

**[569 words]**

The have camels crossed our living rooms and made it to the manger. In our house, we toasted the three who made a perilous journey in hope. Their foreignness serves a point: **all** are welcome in Bethlehem.

With the exception of those few Christians whose ancestors were Jews, the magi represent us as latecomers at the manger, outsiders.

A great deal in our culture – at school, work, and sometimes even at home – can make us feel like outsiders, like we don't amount to much, cannot contribute much. It can make us feel too old, too young, not respected, not useful.

The first message of Epiphany, no matter what the world may say about you or to you, celebrates Jesus welcoming us at the manger, all we bring, and all we are. Nobody can take that away.

Epiphany's second message and meaning is about journey. To lay our eyes on Christ means to set out on a journey.

Young or old, rich or poor, whoever each of us may be, to let God into our lives means that our lives are never the same again. We grow and change as we listen for the voice of the Spirit. It may look like home, but it's a new destination each day.

I hear challenges when I hear the story of the magi: Look for a star to follow. Look for a goal in life bigger than survival. Realize how much good you can do, how much of a person you can be for those around you. Dare to believe you can have a real and growing relationship with God.

Journeys have their good and bad points. The idea of always being on the road, always discovering the new, is exciting, sure, but it's also tiring.

We traditionally depict the magi riding on camels: there is probably no more ill-tempered and uncomfortable beast of burden than a camel, but they were useful; because they were equipped for long journeys, people put up with them.

The sense of adventure also has a flip side of rootlessness, of disorientation. It is possible to believe in Christ, but hold back from letting God into much of our everyday lives.

If you are like me, you would like to know as much as possible about where you are going, you would like to avoid making wrong turns – but without the indignity of stopping to ask for directions.

No matter what we may think about the value of the “institutional church,” community in Christ is important for the journey. Because the journey can be hard, we come to the oasis, the gathering of God’s people in the church.

A real oasis is more than a pit stop. The oasis was a place of safety, of refreshment, of sharing stories with other travelers, of trading tips and warnings about the hazards or changes in the trail.

For those who take their spiritual journey seriously, it is important to stay connected with the community that gathers around word and sacrament. The odds are against our surviving the trip unless we regularly come to where we are welcomed, refreshed, reminded of the directions, and just plain encouraged to keep at it.

Epiphany has a lovely complex of ideas: everybody is called, sent, and can be nourished along the way. It is our annual invitation to saddle up and risk the journey because we know who awaits us at its end.

*[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at [www.diobeth.org](http://www.diobeth.org).]*