

The Feast of Lights - Welcome prior to the Eucharist by the Rt. Rev. Don E. Johnson, Bishop of West Tennessee

St. Mary's Cathedral

January 7, 2007

How many of you had **heard of Hope House** before today?

How many of you have **been to Hope House**? What do you remember about going there? What was that like for you?

German proverb: "A **small** gift is better than a **great** promise."

This afternoon, **you** are giving a gift that some might think is **small**.

You may not be giving a million dollars ... or a new building...
or making all the problems go away at Hope House.

But you are giving your gift of creativity as a sign of care for the children of Hope House.

It is your gift... and it is much better than a great promise.

But your gift **started as a promise**... it started as **part of your Baptismal Promise**.

Remember when you said, "I will with God's help" to three of the eight baptismal promises?

Your **first promise answered the question,** "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?"

"I will with God's help" was your promise...
Today, by keeping your word, it has become your gift.

Your **second promise answered the question,** "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?"

"I will with God's help" was your promise...
Today, by keeping your word, it has become your gift.
Your **third promise answered the question,** "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

"I will with God's help" was your promise...
Today, by keeping your word, it has become your gift.

That is the **nature** of offering your time and care as a gift to someone else. **God's word... living inside you...** the Word you have **promised** to give back to the world...**has become a promise fulfilled... a gift given.**

In you, the Word of God has become flesh and dwells among us all. **You have become God's gift.**

Beyond just doing a good thing to help someone else, as important as that is, to offer your gift **...as a Christian...** is to add another dimension to what you are doing.

You are not only doing a good thing... **You are doing it for the love of God.**

Today we celebrate the Feast of Lights. How many of you have attended this service before? Did you know that the service has been changed this year with you in mind?

The Three Wise Men will still be presenting their gifts, but you will also bring your gifts...your selves... and any other gifts you may have brought or want to bring ... to offer in support of **Hope House.**

Your group's project is such a gift. Your gift is offered in that special Christian way. It becomes all at once... both a gift to the world and a gift of our promises fulfilled now given back to God in thanksgiving.

I can't think of a better group to give our gifts this year than to **Hope House.** It is hope that God gave to each of us... hope of life, hope of new beginnings, hope of God's never failing love. And it is hope that we give in our own small and large ways to those who will benefit from it at Hope House.

We also thank the people of Hope House for giving us the opportunity to give our gift ...for if they had not been open to receive...we would have had no opportunity to give.

So welcome to one and all ... Episcopalians, visitors and other friends ...to **your Cathedral, St. Mary's,** where we thank you for offering your gifts of Hope in this Epiphany Season...the season when the gift of the Christ Child was offered to the whole world. Thank you for being **Christ bearers of the Epiphany light.**

Tonight's service has been changed from the way we have done it in the recent past. This is because our Epiphany calling to be people of God's light calls each of us to be changed for ever.

We will start with a procession of our gifts...We will then offer a procession of **voices at prayer**...voices of the youth of West Tennessee...voices that will surround us with prayer for peace, light, joy, hope and love.

Let these prayers **embrace you** and speak to your heart. These prayers are not just for us to **think** about. They are **an invitation** for each one of us to go out and become sources of Christ's light in a world with too many dark places.

We will hear the word of God through the reading from the Bible. They tell us of the story of the gift of Christ from God to the whole world.

We will hear a **reflection** on that story by one of our own group who has a word to share with us about what this occasion means to him and to all of us.

We will then share in the **Holy Eucharist** together... and this too restores an ancient part of this celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany that we have not taken advantage of in recent years in this setting.

Eucharist means "thanksgiving". We will be offering the thanksgiving gifts of **ourselves** back to God...an offering "to" God that becomes a promise "from" God. God's promise... that when we give ourselves to God we will receive from God ourselves changed and made into new people...We will become people of light, and hope and joy and peace.

The Deacons present in the service will carry out their traditional ministries on behalf of the Church. They will amplify our prayers and carry out the good news of God into the world when they spread among us the Epiphany flame, symbolized by lighting the little candles we will each be given.

The light you are given you are then to become and carry it forth into the world's dark places.

At the end of the service, when you follow the procession out of your Cathedral, you will be carrying the Epiphany candles home with you.

When these small flickering flames go out because of the winds of the world that blow all around us... and eventually they will go out..., don't worry. All we have to do is give another gift of ourselves and relight the fire... in the name of Christ.

Light the fire... Let it burn... For you and I **are the Epiphany light** for the sake of Christ. So **become** a blessed Epiphany fire... one and all! **In the words of our Presiding Bishop, "Burn!"**

That is a gift that, **even if it seems small for now**, just imagine ... how large it can grow before we finish fulfilling the promises we have made for Christ sake "with God's help." Amen.