

“Epiphany”

Matthew 2:1-12

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Prayer for Understanding Ever present Lord, we thank you for your word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Holy Spirit open our eyes to the signs of your presence, open our ears to your voice and open our minds to your wisdom so that our hearts will be cleansed and renewed. Amen.

Happy Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany is the celebration of seekers who experienced the love of God and were filled with joy. Epiphany is the celebration that God is with everyone, God loves everyone, and God will save everyone, insiders and outsiders. Epiphany is an experience of love, joy, peace, grace, or hope. Epiphany is an aha moment, transformation, or healing.

I am here today because of an epiphany moment in 1997 in sub-zero weather at the Deep Freeze Retreat at the Windy Farmhouse at the Wilderness Fellowship near Fredric Wisconsin. I was reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount. Suddenly, I was amazed by grace. God’s grace filled me with wonder and joy. God’s grace filled me with gratitude for all the people who have served to enable me to experience grace. I was filled with peace as I decided to dedicate my life to helping others experience grace.

While 2020 was a challenge year in some ways, it was a year abundant with epiphanies. The talent, creativity, dedication, innovation, and passion of our staff and servants to adapt and provide online worship, with inspiring music and virtual choir. No longer are we a church restricted by physical location. We worship together with people around the world. The Holy Spirit connects us all and fills us with joyful love. We learned that no matter how much the location of our worship changes and the way we worship changes, God’s steadfast love is sure.

I am grateful for all the health care workers who diagnosed me with sleep apnea and the marvel of the CPAP machine that enables me to sleep through the night. Now most mornings I awake with a smile on my face, grateful for a good night’s sleep. My compassion has expanded for all who struggle with sleep. I am grateful for the energy, creativity, and joy rest provides.

Leslie, Spencer, Abigail, and I planned an epic trip to Arizona and Utah. We secured lodging in national parks and got hiking permits to remote areas. Due to the pandemic, we canceled the trip and went to the south shore of Superior. The highlights were going to be sea kayaking the caves and hiking. A storm on Superior changed our kayaking to a protected bay. My painful hip hampered our hiking. Yet, the four of us had a week abundant with laughter, joy, and play. Our love for each other enables us to have fun regardless of our circumstances. I am grateful for the love we share. Our altered trip meant that we were in our rental lodging when my Dad was alert for a few hours. My sister face timed us. Leslie, Spencer, Abigail, and I had a great conversation with my Dad. Sometimes grand moments happen when all of one’s plans fall apart. I am extremely fortunate for my family makes any place paradise.

When my Dad entered Life Triumphant, the First Presbyterian Church of Abbotsford, where I grew up, and my Dad was a member, had been closed for months. Their pastor was retired. They had a special session meeting and decided to open the church for a celebration of my Dad’s earthly life and resurrection. The presbytery recruited a lay pastor who trained with my Dad in the lay pastor program to lead the service. The church is small in people and abundant with grand hospitality and compassion. People came that I have not seen or talked to in 30 years and our conversations resumed as if we were never apart. The grace of people never ceases to amaze me. The reunions were a foretaste of the glory of heaven. Nothing can diminish the wonder of love.

Since my anterior hip replacement surgery, I am enjoying pain-free walks. Every time I walk, I am joyful for the privilege to be able to walk. Grateful for the health care workers, engineers, and staff who made my surgery possible. Grateful for all the people who dedicate their life to healing people. I appreciate that I can relate more completely with those who are struggling with pain. I hope this enables my pastoral care to be more comforting and hopeful. I hope this enables me to be more gracious. I am grateful that God created our bodies with the ability to heal. The experience has motivated me to lose weight, so I can reduce the stress on my joints with the hope of enjoying walking and biking in the future. This experience increased my awareness of the simple joys I take for granted. Any day that I can walk or bike is a glorious day.

As a country this was a year of great epiphany. Awareness of injustice, racism, and inequality has grown. Passion to advocate for quality life for all is flourishing. Our leadership has become more diverse. Positive change is happening.

What epiphanies have you had? How have your epiphanies transformed you? What are you learning from your epiphanies?

The gospel of Matthew proclaims, **Matthew 2:1-12 NLT “Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time magi from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and**

asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote: ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’” Then Herod called for a private meeting with the magi, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!” After this interview the magi went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.”

Garrison Keillor jokingly speculates that the magi were the first Lutherans because they brought gifts. One gift myrrh is a sort of casserole made from macaroni and hamburger—you bring it in a covered dish. He was going to stop at the department store and get something expensive like gold or frankincense, but his wife, a wise woman, said, “Here, take this myrrh. They’ll be hungry. And make sure you bring back the dish.”

Why was Herod and everyone in Jerusalem deeply disturbed and fearful of the group of seekers? Were they concerned that they would not enjoy the covered dish, macaroni casserole? Was it because they had different skin color? Did they fear immigration? Did they fear change?

The gospel of Matthew’s initial target readers were Jews, this is why the first chapter lists the ancestors of Jesus, establishing that Jesus is a descendant of David and Abraham. This was a group of insiders with strict rules and unchanging traditions for every aspect of life. They believed God’s love was funneled into the temple and then dispersed in a particular order beginning with the most righteous. The seekers were outsiders, unclean and sought to directly experience God. The account of the seekers reveals that God is with everyone, even the outsiders are welcomed as insiders by God. Pastor John Buchanan said, “The magi are outsiders, aliens, non-Jews in a very Jewish story. At the outset, Matthew introduces Jesus by telling about Gentiles—Arabs, in fact—at the manger. It is a story that shatters religious tradition, rules, customs and brings outsiders inside. Jesus will shatter all the boundaries of race, social class, status, gender, and religious morality. All the outsiders, the marginal, the poor, the sinners, the unclean, the tax collectors, prostitutes and lepers, women and children, foreigners, Roman centurions, outsiders, all of them, will be welcomed to Jesus company, and to God’s table. Jesus taught that there are things more important than the religious traditions, liturgy, and the doctrines we have developed over the centuries and that have become precious to us, too precious, so precious that we cannot see God’s love for the ones we have cast out. Jesus’ radical inclusivity threatened, and still threatens, all who are invested in exclusivity.”

One epiphany is that Jesus came for everyone, that we should not divide, exclude, or judge. Is there someone, or some group, that you need to welcome as your sibling, a fellow beloved member of God’s family? Who are the outsiders today? How will we advocate for them?

Another epiphany was that everyone in Jerusalem had nothing to fear from the seekers who worshiped God in their own unique way. Their quest was to worship and receive the joyful abundant life Jesus graciously provides. Diversity is a gift that expands our perception of God. Variety enhances our love and deepens our joy. Be open, welcoming, hospitable, curious, and eager to learn from others, especially people who see the world from a different perspective.

Another epiphany was the seekers were transformed. I imagine those wise, scholars thought they had seen everything there is to see and had their opinions about what is true neatly in place and what is possible all neatly formulated. I imagine that they, like many people, assumed that authority resides in the king’s palace, in politics and military might. I imagine they assumed that truth resides in books, laws, and a just judicial system. I imagine they believed joy flows from being in control and constructing pleasant circumstances. Everything changed for them when they discovered all that they were seeking and authority and truth in Jesus. The epiphany filled them with joy. They experienced that true power does not come from rulers, palaces and wealth, true power comes from vulnerable love, God in human flesh. True power comes from love freely given to all, uniting all. Joy is found in giving, serving, and worshiping. The seekers came looking for a king in a palace. They discovered Jesus in a simple structure, loved by Mary, Joseph, and shepherds. Their transformation caused them to leave a different way. The love of God in Jesus changed them and their plans.

God is constantly blessing us with epiphanies. Each of us will have our own unique epiphanies. Some epiphanies are for everyone. Some epiphanies are for certain people. Epiphanies expand our ability to give and receive love. Epiphanies expand our dreams and hopes. Epiphanies enable us to be gracious. Epiphanies transform us.

Reflect upon your epiphanies. What epiphanies have you had? How have your epiphanies transformed you? What are you learning from your epiphanies? Share your epiphanies. Amen