

“Epiphany - Baptism of our Lord Mashup”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
The American Church in Paris – January 6th, 2021

Please read:
Matthew 2:1-12
Ephesians 3:1-12

Epiphany turned to a day of infamy this past Wednesday, and I think while we were all shocked, angered, disgusted and ashamed by the breaching of our capitol by an armed mob carrying American, Trump & Jesus, and Confederate flags, we shouldn't have been surprised by what happened. The President incited them. What was most disturbing, and disorienting was the ease with which these white nationalists and Proud Boys waltzed past the police. *Black Lives Matter* demonstrators noted the national guard was ready and waiting to deflect them from the capitol. But for the rowdy rabble-rousers this Wednesday, we saw them getting high fives and selfies with the police on their way to desecrate the chambers of congress. What was revealed here is nothing more than what you might expect after four years of flexible facts and conspiracy theories. “You reap what you sow.”

Brian McLaren writes this: “*Like wood, reality has a grain. Like a river, it has a current. Like a story, it has characters and setting and conflict and resolution. . . . Creation reveals wisdom through its patterns. It reveals wisdom about its source and purpose and about our quest to be alive . . . if we are paying attention.*”¹

If we are paying attention is the key. As a worshipping community, we are now in the season of *Epiphany*, which means manifestation, revealed. Over the coming weeks we will be paying attention to various epiphanies of who Jesus really is, but also who Jesus calls us to be. Epiphany follows Christmas so we can reflect more deeply on the implications of the incarnation, and what the embodiment of truth and grace revealed in Jesus looks like here and now.

We all know the story of the Magi following the star. But the key antagonist in the story is Herod, the evil strongman who basically will do anything to hang on to power. Part of the story we don't often talk about is the massacre of the innocents. Herod decreed that all the Jewish males ages two years old and under would be executed to make sure there was no threat to his reign. It doesn't sound like such a fairytale after the events of this past week. In fact, it holds up for us the contrast between the way of Christ, revealed to the gentile magi as a vulnerable babe in a manger, or the way of Herod, a cowardly thug who will lie and cheat and do anything to hold onto his power.

We may admire the wise men for many things: their scientific prowess, their shrewd diplomacy, their good taste in gifts. I especially love the detail in the story that like the shepherds in Luke's birth narrative, the magi were *overwhelmed with joy* when they realized their search was complete... But what strikes me as singularly peculiar and important about these distant journeyers for us today is the fact that *they are strangers who do the right thing!*

These wise men are foreigners (Persians!), Gentiles, non-Jews, people outside of the ancient covenants of Israel. The Hebrew term for “gentile” is “goyim,” and the Greek term is “ethnikos,” (ethnic) both terms which have acquired a negative connotation. By the time of Christ, the historian Tacitus says that for the Jews to call someone a “gentile” was like to regard them “with all the hatred

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (Jericho: 2015), 12.

of enemies.”² So it is these first *ethnikos*, these first stranger-star-gazers whose presence at the manger proclaims to the world that the secret, hidden, obscure Christ is secret, hidden, and obscure no more: the child in the manger, who would in short time grow up to be the man nailed to a cross for the sins of the world; this little child in the manger is God's means to worldwide redemption.

But the wise men serve more than this exotic purpose in the Christmas narrative. They are more than revelation receivers in God's cosmic drama. They are *our* representatives, far more so than ever the shepherds or the angels could be. They represent *us* because, like them, we are outsiders, Gentiles, and by rights wouldn't receive the revelation of God's good news of the newborn King were it not for the tender mercy - the amazing grace - of God.

Now here is why I make note of these strangers this week. What has impressed me with the story of that first Epiphany is that it was the foreigners who are the heroes of the story, even under threat of Herod. They tricked the King and did not give away where Jesus was. This story reminds me that God chooses strangers to be part of the story, because God is gracious and cares for them too.

Honestly, I want to demonize those thugs who stormed the steps of the capitol, who defiled the offices and chambers of our Elected representatives and who caused the death of five people. It's easy to demonize them, too. They are clearly different from me, with their scraggy beards and camo-clothes. I would like to imagine they are nothing like me. But then there is the woman who was shot, an Air Force veteran who served our country. What about her? Sure, she bought into the delusional narratives of power, but she didn't deserve to die... In fact, I must admit, these people were mostly doing what they did because they thought they were doing what was right, what was good, what was patriotic... People can be made to do the most outrageous things if they think it's for a good cause.

Secondly, like these strange magi, we have a choice about which King we will bow down to: The violent and dominating Herods of this world, or the Prince of Peace who comes vulnerably, willing to be a victim to the same mob violence. This is not an easy choice. My anger is silenced if I am to bow before the newborn King who chose the way of the cross. Justice is trickier than it first appears. I'll never forget Diogenes Allen, one of my PTS professors asking me, “Are you sure you want justice, Scott? Are you sure you want what you really deserve?”

The question is, of course, how do we know which is the way of Herod and which is the way of Jesus? What stars are really guiding us? I was intrigued by the “star word” gift that we received from Shannan Vance-Ocampo during last Sunday's service. At the end of the service, she gave as a gift to each of the congregations of our presbytery a “star word” for us to ponder in this new year. Our star word, incidentally, is “acceptance.” This may be an important word for us personally, as a congregation, and as a larger community. Acceptance is the last stage of grief, what gives us freedom to reorient and move forward into a new reality. What immediately came to my mind when I heard that word is the famous prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr known as the Serenity prayer. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Again, *paying attention* is key!

² Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.

Today in the liturgical calendar is *Baptism of the Lord Sunday* and makes a quick jump from the starry manger scene with the Magi to the muddy banks of the Jordan river where Jesus is baptized by John. You can read about this in the gospel according to Mark (chapter one), but there are two things I would invite you to pay attention to and that might help us in our reorientation going forward this year. First of all, Jesus is not going into the waters of baptism for repentance and the forgiveness of sins because *he* needs it, but rather Jesus is going into the waters of baptism and the forgiveness of sins because *we* need it.

This is the Epiphany echo of Jesus' revelation as *Emmanuel*. As Jesus begins his adult public ministry, he is still *God with us*. God does not give up on any of us, sinners that we are, but make no mistake about it, we are all sinners in need of redemption. Secondly, the first epiphany or revealing of who Jesus is when Mark describes at his baptism the heavens are torn open, a dove descends on Jesus and the voice of God declares, "*This is my beloved...*" Before Jesus performs any miracles, does any work, or accomplishes anything really in terms of his ministry he is declared "beloved." The first Epiphany of who Jesus is at his baptism is that he is *all about grace*. He is the Beloved, not because of performance or accomplishments. He is simply *Beloved of God*. And I believe part of the good news we need to hear this day is that this same One who plunges into the depths of our world's brokenness and sin, comes with the same message of unconditional love for us: We are beloved of God, and called to live our lives out from *this* identity.

I want to invite you to reorient your life, to recalibrate, to navigate from the star of your baptism today. To remember the significance of your baptism. By remembering your baptism, you reclaim your identity as *Beloved Child of God*. You cannot hate if you are living into your baptismal identity as beloved. You cannot judge others if you are living into your baptismal identity as beloved. You cannot pursue division and exclusion if you are living into your baptismal identity as beloved. You cannot give up loving your neighbors and even your enemies if you are living into your baptismal identity as beloved. You cannot give up on pursuing doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God if you are living into your baptism identity as beloved.

The Apostle Paul in our text this morning from Ephesians but in all of his writings in the New Testament makes it clear that as followers of Christ, the way of Christ is to extend this same gracious status as beloved to all people. Paul sees his mission as a means of communicating the Gospel to the Gentiles. And so, we learn that along with Paul *we too* are part of the saving work of Christ and called to be part of God's plan of salvation for the whole world.

On Christmas Eve, 1968, the US Apollo 8 spacecraft orbited the far side of the moon and coming around saw the earth appearing in morning sunlight. William Anders, one of the astronauts, took a photo of the event. The now famous "Earthrise" photograph was shared with the world on Christmas Day. Commander Frank Borman shared the poet Archibald MacLeish's reflection inspired by the photo. "To see the Earth as it truly is, small, and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the Earth together, brothers [and sisters] on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold — brothers [and sisters] who know now that [we] are truly brothers [and sisters]."

What better way to begin this New Year than to remember and reflect on the cosmic dimensions of God's purposes of redemption and reconciliation, and that part of our calling, like the grace given to the apostle Paul (who considers himself "the very least of all the saints"), is "*to bring to the Gentiles*

the good news of the boundless riches of Christ.” The gentiles are those others who are strangers, whether politically, or economically, or racially or culturally. Anyone who we put in that box of “*those people*” are the gentiles we are called to love.

One last note: It’s interesting that after giving their gifts and paying homage, the Magi left by another way home. As we reflect on the shocking and sad events of this past week, but also the saving grace of our baptism, we know we cannot go on with business as usual. Consider that when God’s transforming love has touched your heart, you cannot remain the same. When you bow down and pay homage to the Prince of Peace, you will be changed in your thinking, speaking and actions.

Consider how you are called to a new way of showing God’s self-giving love to your neighbors, even your enemies and especially those who see things differently than you do politically. Kierkegaard once said that simple “mercy has converted more souls than zeal, eloquence, or learning, or all of them put together!”

So, friends, let’s resolve as we begin a new year together to pay better attention, to remember our baptism, to follow the patterns of reality revealed in Jesus’ way of forgiveness and self-giving love. Let’s be a Community of the Beloved, who will not bow to the pressures of the Herods of this world, but who will follow the Prince of Peace. Like those first strangers, let God lead us along a different way and new life of hope, joy, justice and the Light of Christ’s love for all...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.