

Sermon – 1/6/19
“Revelation and Revolution”
Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany

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Happy Epiphany! This is the day when we remember the journey of the magi to Bethlehem. The word “epiphany” means **manifestation** or **showing forth**. It is a time when we celebrate the revelation of Christ to the whole world. The gift of God’s love given for the sake of the world is embodied in the Christ-child - the babe born in Bethlehem. The magi searched for the “King of the Jews,” but on Epiphany we celebrate that Jesus Christ is King over all – over every nation and over all creation.

The Jews who lived at the time of Jesus believed that the Messiah would specifically come to deliver them from the oppressive Roman rule. You can see that oppression personified in the character of Herod who later in Matthew’s gospel ordered that the baby boys under the age of two be destroyed. He wanted no threat to his kingdom.

But God’s rule **is** a threat to the ways of the world – and often times to our ways. The reign of Christ is about love and life and liberty. It is about light in the darkness. It is hope in the midst of despair. It is freedom from the bondage to sin and all the other chains that we put upon ourselves by fashioning our own gods in this world – money, sports, pleasure, possessions, even relationships. And when we ignore injustice, when we focus on our wants first, when we live our lives from a place of fear, we ignore the revelation of God’s love for us and for the world.

In Matthew’s story – this revelation produced a star that caused the magi to journey – to sacrifice – to leave part of themselves behind – to worship the new born King. Some joke about what would have happened had the magi been women. Maybe you’ve heard the punch line – “If there had been Wise Women - they would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, have brought practical gifts and there would be Peace on Earth!” (The World’s Greatest Collection of Church Jokes, p. 110-111) Well – we all have our strengths. And we all have our weaknesses. Weaknesses that can lead to dark days and dark lives. And the people of God are no stranger to dark times.

The Prophet Isaiah wrote to a people in exile about a time when God’s light would shine on them and they would be delivered from **their darkness**. Far away from Jerusalem and the life that they knew – they wondered if and when they would ever return. Isaiah’s words, easily picked up in the story of the Magi, declare that not only will Jerusalem be restored, but it will be a source of light and hope for all the nations. That light has come – and it is far brighter than the light of the star – it is the Christ-child himself who is the light of all people – as the Gospel of John states.

When the Magi found themselves face-to-face with the light – the revelation of God’s love in Jesus Christ – they offered their gifts and they bowed down in worship. Herod had an entirely different response. He was caught off guard. He was worried. He was scared. He felt threatened. “What?” “A new King has been born?” “Well – come back and let me know where you find him so I can come worship him myself!” Yeah, right!

Herod had no interest in worshipping the Christ-child. He was too busy worshipping himself. He couldn’t see the star. He couldn’t decipher the prophecy. And he couldn’t bring himself to let go of his power. And so – he braced himself as any King would who was facing a rebellion or a revolution and tried to squash it – to ruin its chances of having any impact whatsoever. While the Magi went on their little pilgrimage – he set in motion a series of plans that would try and nip that revolution in the bud.

But Herod didn’t know that you can’t stop a Revolution of Love. As the hymn declares, “Love has come, a light in the darkness! Love has come in the Bethlehem sky!” And that love would grow, and spread, and transform the world.

Jill Duffield, editor of the Presbyterian Outlook, writes that “Herod’s epiphany of Jesus’ power begets fear. The Wise Men pay homage. The shepherds responded with worship, joy, and unrestrained proclamation. Mary ponders these things in her heart. Soon Pharisees and Chief Priests will plot to kill him. A few people will leave all they have and follow him. Those possessed by evil spirits will recognize him. The most vulnerable will cry out to him for mercy. The hungry and thirsty will be satisfied. The estranged will be reconciled. The guilty as sin, the guilty of sin, sinners all will be forgiven. Mercy now trumps sacrifice. Grace abounds. Justice will rush through the streets like a river bursting its banks. The most recalcitrant of wrongdoers will miraculously repent and seek to make things right. **The world is about to turn.** Nothing remains the same with the in breaking of the light of Christ, the coming of the glory of God, the incarnation of the Son of Man, the birth of the King of the Jews. Not then and not now.”ⁱ Herod has every reason to be afraid!

I wonder if we are also sometimes afraid. As much as we want light in our dark times, sometimes I wonder if we aren’t a little uncomfortable with the light. Are we willing to really let it shine fully in our lives? In other words, are we willing to let God have God’s way with us - to give everything up - to follow whole-heartedly - to give ourselves completely to this Revolution of Love? We also must respond to this light that shines in the darkness.

The late Ann Weems in her book of poetry, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, expresses her own sense of desire in joining the revolution in the following poem titled “The Gifts of the Magi.”ⁱⁱ

O Lord, I’d like to go to the stable this night!
I’d run - even through the dark
To lay my gifts at your feet!

Lord, why couldn’t I have been there?
I needn’t have been a king - perhaps just a shepherd child
Or someone sent from the inn - To check on the progress of the birth...

Or are you waiting this night in other stables
For me - to bring my gift?
Are you waiting for me to run
Even through the dark and cold of the night?

Perhaps the question is rhetorical. We talk about Advent being a season of waiting – our waiting for the coming of Christ. Well then – perhaps Epiphany is another season of waiting – God waiting patiently for us to respond in faith to the gift of love that has been given for the whole world. It isn’t a gift to hoard – it isn’t a gift that divides one from another – it isn’t a gift that oppresses or alienates people from their community – it isn’t a gift that instills fear or creates anxiety. Love is for sharing, for building bridges, for lifting other up, for drawing others in, for creating hope, offering help, and building home.

Last week, Pastor Larry reminded us of the wardrobe change that is required for the follower of Jesus – put on patience, kindness, compassion, humility and above all else love. If you are going to join this revolution of love – you’ve got to change clothes. But that may not be all. You may also have to change seats. Because there might be a little bit of Herod in all of us and it is hard for us to give up power. When we do - guess who sits in the driver’s seat. Jesus does. He calls the shots and He guides the way. But it isn’t just a two-seater. It’s a big bus with lots of seats and all sorts of people – men, women, and children - from all over the world and from all times and places joining together as followers of Jesus to transform this world by letting the light of God’s love shine for all to see. We lift our lights like that moment on Christmas Eve but we do it all year long!

Theologian Kendra Hotz writes that “The truth that grasps us in the moment of epiphany, the moment when Christ is revealed to the Gentiles, is that Jesus Christ is the very love of God incarnate, and that love cannot be confined to ethnic or national identity; it cannot be restricted by gender or claimed only by the powerful and privileged. Jesus Christ, as the new king of Israel, is in fact, Jesus Christ the sovereign ruler over all the earth. In

him, at last, God's promise that Israel will be a light to the nations is fulfilled. The expansive scope of God's love in Jesus Christ means that all are invited, all are included. God's sovereign grace reaches out and calls in every last one of God's beloved children who will come from every compass point to worship God, to kneel before Christ, and to dine at the heavenly banquet."ⁱⁱⁱ

So here's an invitation to action. There is a great article in this month's *Presbyterian's Today* magazine about how Epiphany is practiced in some of our Latino congregations and families. One of the practices that is starting to spread from this rich tradition is something called "Star" Words. People ask God to reveal a word that will guide them and help them focus their faith in the New Year – a concept or idea that helps a disciple to be more faithful. The Star Word could be "Love". Or it could be – "Gratitude". Or perhaps "Sharing" or "Surrender" or "Patience." Why not ask God to reveal one word to you that can be your focus in 2019. In that way, perhaps you are – like Ann Weems - running through the dark and cold night to offer your own gift at the feet of the Christ child – to offer your own self in this Revolution of Love.

Matthew tells us that the Magi, because of a dream/vision, went home by a different way. They didn't return to Jerusalem to help Herod in his scheme. Instead, their path changed. They walked on a new road. Maybe we can leave worship today walking in a new way. Why not literally walk or drive home a different way today to symbolize that commitment for the New Year? One thing is for sure – if you receive the revelation and join the revolution – you will never be the same!

To God be the Glory! Amen!

ⁱ <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102135377571&ca=e2c2e51b-1a87-4c5b-a0ca-eb8138a39c13>

ⁱⁱ Ann Weems, "The Gifts of the Magi" in Kneeling in Bethlehem. The Westminster Press. 1980. P. 68

ⁱⁱⁱ Kendra G. Hotz in Feasting on the Word: Year C. WJK. 2009. P. 198