

"Faithfully Following"
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
Epiphany - January 6, 2019

Matthew 2: 1-12

Eleven days ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. One of the primary ways that we mark this occasion in our lives is by giving gifts to one another. Ever since we were children, we have associated Christmas with wrapped presents under a tree. We go to bed on Christmas Eve dreaming of what might await us the next day, and then we are thrilled or surprised, and in some cases disappointed, by what we unwrap the next morning. As children, there is a natural excitement and anticipation which coincides with December 25.

One of the things that happens as we grow older, I believe, is that our focus shifts from what we will receive to what we will give to others. I have seen that in my own children, and perhaps you have seen it, too, in yours or those you know. I think we all go through that transition in life, where we receive more inner joy and satisfaction by what we give to others, and how our gift might surprise or move or touch the recipient in a unique way. Perhaps that reflects our realization that true inner joy and peace only occurs when we are willing to give of ourselves to others.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the day when the kings from the east travelled to Bethlehem to kneel at the newborn Jesus' cradle, offering him priceless gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. We often look to the magi as our example of gift-giving, of bringing the very best of ourselves to lay at our Lord's feet, giving thanks to God for all he has done for us on Christmas morning.

Today, I am also struck by the name we give this day in the church's calendar: Epiphany. Besides the church's name for this day, the dictionary defines epiphany as "a moment in which you suddenly see or understand something in a new or very clear way" (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany>). How are we faithfully following the light of God so that we might understand life in new or very clear ways? What epiphanies have we known in our past, and what epiphanies might we know in our future, so that we might suddenly see God's claim on our life?

In our gospel lesson today, we read that the wise men see a star in the east, and come to King Herod, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod is not exactly thrilled to meet these visitors from afar, and after consulting with his advisors, he asks the magi to "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

Clearly, this is not Herod's intention, but it is the ruse he uses to hopefully manipulate the magi for his own self-serving purposes.

Mark Sargent writes: *And so, the Magi leave Herod, the threatened one; and they follow the star until it stops over the place where the child was. And Matthew tells us, in a verse that leaps off the page, that "when they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."*

I can promise you that when the Magi experienced that joy, they were struck by contrast. They were struck by how different that joy felt from the feelings they had experienced in that secret meeting with Herod. One felt so right. The other felt so wrong. The joy they felt when the star stopped was the inner confirmation that they had arrived at the place. Anytime we experience that kind of deep joy that is God's gift, then we know that we are where we are meant to be.

Have you ever had such a moment? Sure you have. Stop and call it to mind. A moment when things seemed to really line up for you. A moment when you felt so at home in your own skin, so at one with yourself and everything, that you knew the place at which you had arrived is the place where you belong. A moment when you can say, "This is me. This is why I'm alive. This is who I am. This is where I am meant to be." A moment when the star you've been following stops and you find yourself overwhelmed with the joy that comes from being you. That's the moment I wish for you. That's the moment God wishes for all of us. And what I also wish for you is that all of your moments could be characterized by that kind of joy. In the new year to come and in whatever years may follow for us, what if all of life could be the delightful experience of being flooded by and overwhelmed with joy? That joy happens, when like the Magi, we find ourselves at the place where we can freely and truly be who we really and truly are. Where is that joy place for you?

That's not as easy a question to answer as it may seem, because our lives are often not characterized by such joy. Our lives often reflect something other than the experience of being overwhelmed with joy. Why is that? (http://davi.org/919-the_gift_of_the_mag1)

I think one of the reasons we struggle with living in joy is that we lose sight of what's truly important in life. Sometimes, we become focused on what new things we think we need, rather than giving humble thanks for what we already have. Sometimes, we see our world through Herod's eyes - eyes of fear and mistrust, not believing that someone who is different than us might actually be a good thing. Sometimes, we aren't able to experience joy because we can only see the world through the eye of scarcity - what we lack or wish we had - rather than the eye of gratitude. When we see the world through self-centered eyes, then we fail to experience the epiphany of God's joy in Jesus Christ.

What has been an epiphany for you in the past? Was it a health crisis for yourself or someone you love, and you now cherish every moment you have with loved ones, both the joyful and the challenging? Was it a time in your career when you said, “This isn’t working for me; I need to do something which is fulfilling,” and in taking that courageous step you started on a path of joy and fulfillment? Was it a moment in your marriage when you realized you had been blaming your spouse for everything that was wrong, rather than looking in the mirror and seeing how you needed to change? When was that moment in which you suddenly saw or understood something in a new or very clear way?

Another name for Epiphany, especially in the Latin American world, is Three Kings Day. And today, I believe we have been given a gift from God to experience an epiphany of our own, as we mark an important transition in ministry here at John Knox.

Eleven years ago today, the first worship service took place for Iglesia Nueva Creacion, the Hispanic new church development which has met here at John Knox throughout this time. Our congregation opened its doors, its hearts, and its lives to our sisters and brothers in faith, and we have worshipped together, served together, eaten together, and prayed together during these years. There is no question that we have been changed by God through the gift of their presence in our life of faith.

But today, we will say goodbye to these dear friends on Sundays, as they will have their last worship service in this sanctuary. Iglesia Nueva Creacion has combined with Iglesia Hermandad Cristiana, which worships at Westview Christian Church. Hector Hernandez, who has been pastor at Nueva Creacion, is taking a full-time position with the Disciples of Christ denomination, and the combined church will be pastored by Rev. Bere Gil Soto, who has been pastor of Iglesia Hermandad Cristiana. Today, we are all invited to come at 1:30pm for a celebration service with all the congregations represented. It will be a chance in worship to give thanks for these eleven years of shared ministry, and you never know, there might even be a surprise guest here - I’ll just leave it at that!

On the surface, this might appear to be an event that is full of sadness and loss. Indeed, there is a sense of grief that a major component of our identity as a church is changing and leaving. But I would also argue that this is an epiphany for us as a church - both on a local level and on a larger level. Here’s what I mean.

The future of Christ’s Church cannot be bound by denominational differences. We must be willing to think creatively and adaptively for Christ’s ministry to flourish in this world. That means faithfully following God’s light wherever it leads - including giving up some traditions so that new ones might be formed. While I will miss seeing our friends on

Sundays worshipping in this space, I know that God is doing something new and exciting through them in this new partnership.

And I know that our identity as Christians must not be solely defined by what happens on Sundays. We have every intention to continue to find ways to partner together with our Hispanic brothers and sisters in ministry. That might be continued partnerships, such as Vacation Bible School, Easter and Fall Festivals, and soccer camps. That might be new partnerships which arise out of God-inspired initiatives which we have not yet discerned. But part of faithfully following the light of God is always being willing to allow that light to illumine a new corner of our world. I am confident that God will continue to illumine our shared paths for ministry, just as our lives have been illumined these last eleven years.

On a personal level, what will be our epiphanies in the year ahead, so that we might allow God to overwhelm us with joy with the gift of love we celebrate at Christmas? Will it be seeing in our child the genuine effort she or he always gives, rather than always critiquing him or her for not being good enough? Will it be recognizing that we truly are fulfilled when we serve alongside one another in ministry, rather than waiting to be served by others? Will it be when we let our guard down, drop our defenses, and invite the Spirit to infiltrate our hearts so that we aren't doing our will, but God's will? When will be that moment in which you suddenly see or understand something in a new or very clear way?

As we give thanks today for the Magi, their faithfulness, their joy, and their offerings of themselves to our Lord, may we faithfully follow God's light so we might be changed by God's epiphanies, which show us the depth of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.