

Sermon: January 5th, 2020- Go a different road!

I have always found that this Sunday, Epiphany Sunday, feels a little strange. In fact, I comment on this almost every year at this time. In many ways our minds and hearts have shifted away from the Christmas season; in most cases much of our decorations have been safely boxed away for another year. The gifts we received have found their place in our homes and likely have been well used. If your household is anything like mine, then you are likely still finishing up the Christmas baking and sweets, but you are not eating them with the same carefree gusto that you did over a week ago, instead with every bite you take guilt kicks in, reminding you that you really don't need that much butter and sugar in your life. This Sunday is a weird Sunday in our church calendar because all around us are remnants of the season just passed, I wonder how many of you were surprised to still see Christmas decorations up in the sanctuary today, or maybe thought to yourself, "shouldn't those be down by now?" For many, life got back to the normal routines this past Thursday and for everyone else, the normal routines will likely commence tomorrow. WE find ourselves ready to move on, ready to tread down a different road, and yet here we are, seemingly hanging on to the remnants of Christmas.

Traditionally, epiphany Sunday, and honestly the whole season of Epiphany tends to be a lower attendance Sunday/season (*and its not just because the annual meetings also fall during this time, or is it?*) Attendance is always higher in the Advent and Christmas seasons, I believe because its fun and joy filled, we love the hymns, we love the rituals, we love the season; but I often wonder if like the sugar overload, many folks have experienced a church overload in these seasons and so find other things to do come Sunday morning in early January. And yet, as a minister I am puzzled by this, I puzzled by how we can so easily shut our faith practise off, simply because we have experienced a overload of joy, hope and grace? And so I wonder if another reason for lower then normal attendance this time of year, and particularly this Sunday, is that folks believe that the church, seemingly cannot let go of the Christmas account; and when we have already boxed it all up in our minds, and are just finishing up the little things left here or there, we don't want to have to hear it and see it again.

Yet, here we are, January 5th, and our scripture passage today from Matthew depicts an element of most nativity scenes, depicts a story showcased on a great deal of Christmas card covers, an account that we all know that of the visit of the Magi, or the wisemen from the east. We, collectively, have over equated this story as part of the Christmas story (in fact the visit of the Magi and their gift giving, is often what we use to explain why we give gifts in the Christmas season). And when we have boxed up Christmas in our minds already, it seems strange to then focus on something we have already let go of for another year. And so once again the church seems behind the times, unable to let go of the past, unwilling to move forward.

However, the visit of the Magi, yes in our collective memories and in popular culture, is a part of the Christmas narrative, but in reality is a stand alone account, that draws us as faithful people, not to box everything up that we have focused on over the last two seasons, but to understand what the hope, peace, joy and love that we talked about calls us to be and to do, not just in one season, but in all of our seasons. Though maybe to some it seems like holding on to the wonder of the season, the truth is this account today from Matthew and the start of the Epiphany season which it heralds, is one of most underappreciate and yet profound moments of the church year, for it reminds us why it is that we gather together each and every Sunday and it encourages us for the days ahead.

One of the best descriptions I have found about what Epiphany Sunday, and the story of the Magi, is all about, comes from a scholar and poet, named John Phillip Newell, John says this about Epiphany, "the word 'epiphany' simply means 'showing' or 'shining forth.' Divine light shines forth from this Child. But it should not so much be understood (just) as the *appearance* of God... The divine light that shines in the Child is not a foreign light to the earth. It is the Light at the heart of all life. It is the Light from which all things come. If somehow this Light were extracted from the universe, everything would cease to exist. So, this is a story about the Light at the heart of everything, the Light at the heart of you, the Light at the heart of me." That is really important for us as faithful people to understand, that the light born in the stable and honoured and adored by us over the last season, and the magi on this epiphany Sunday, is the same light found in your heart and my heart; it is something that cannot be boxed up, ignored, or put to the side.

I appreciate those words from John Phillip Newell so much, and honestly, I turn to them almost every year come Epiphany Sunday, because as I already said, in our *minds* we have tended to box away the story of the Christ child, the story of Christmas, the story of hope, peace, joy and love. But, this account today of the Magi, and the season of Epiphany reminds us that the light of God, a light not separate from us, but within us, is a light that calls us to be led by our hearts and moved by the Spirit; it is a light that cannot be boxed away for it is a part of everything we are and do; it burst forth in creation, burst forth from a manger and burst forth from an empty tomb; this light shining forth is not just for Christmas, its for always.

When you look at our account today from Matthew, what we see is that this is not so much a Christmas story, as it is a story of living out the Christmas message. These Magi from the east, had observed the star which rose into the sky to point the way to the messiah. They, likely astrologers, philosophers and scholars and not actually kings, set out to find the place where the light of the star rested. The author of Matthew describes them first going to Jerusalem, which was centre of power in the region, a city that Jesus speaks a lot about in his own time. When they arrive, they claim an audience with King Herod, who as a man of power in the city of power, does not take kindly to the idea that a king has been born. He sends them on their way to Bethlehem with the secret intent that he can discover the location of this so-called King from these so-called wise men; and in turn can put an end to his kingship sooner rather than later.

Having listened to Herod's instructions these magi continue to follow the star until it stops over the place where Jesus is and then they pay homage to him and offer him gifts which symbolize his coming days; Gold a symbol of his Kingship, Frankincense a resin-like substance used in the rituals of the temple, thus a symbol of Jesus' priesthood and Myrrh, a substance more valuable than Gold, used often as a pain killer and was also used as an embalming element; which means that yes it symbolized death, but as a pain killer it also symbolized new life, thus representing Jesus death and resurrection.

All of these gifts are important and symbolic, but what I find to be the most symbolic piece of the whole account is that when the Magi leave, they do so by another road, hence not

back to the seat of power that was Jerusalem. They are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and so they take another road; they are changed by their recognition of God's light in the Christ child. Thinking back on the quote I shared with you, John Newell describes Epiphany as recognizing the light that is in the heart of everything. And these Magi from the east, having encountered the light of Jesus, having given him gifts, having been enveloped in the light of God, listen to that light in their hearts, not just their minds, but in their hearts and they return to their own country on another road; they changed their pattern of operation.

That for me is pinnacle moment for today for us. That having come through the Advent and Christmas season, and maybe in our minds wanting to box everything up and move on to the next thing, on this Sunday, we are reminded not only to linger in the light of God for a while, but to listen to that light guiding us in our hearts and to walk a new road; to change the patterns that we are use to. Ultimately this account and the timing of it are like the first new year's resolutions; but in other ways I hope they are not, because the call to live in the light is a call not to only follow for a couple weeks. If our faith is something we can box away or put on the shelf, or simply that is something that has become so routine that we never see or feel or experience anything new then we do a great disservice to ourselves and to this wonderful world of which we are a part of.

Each of us has within us the epiphany light of God. The Epiphany story calls us to see things in new ways; to question what we think we know, to find the good in every situation, to muster a blessing in a time a hardship. To grow and to change even when we think we are too old to change or to old to learn anything new. Epiphany reminds us that the light we experience on Christmas eve, is a light that is with us always and should cause us to rush forth in hope to see what that light can illuminate in our days to come. Our faith in God should be the same, it should not be something we can shelf or box away or ignore, faith in God requires of us that we constantly seek new ways of engagement, new ways of loving, different roads to walk. It doesn't mean we change our beliefs, but instead that we allow our belief in a higher power, a light of love, our God to Change us.

Find God's light in the heart of everything you see and do; don't box away like the ornament that represent it, instead find its meaning in all that you are. For that is the lesson of the Magi and a lesson we all need to heed, today and always. Amen.