

Aldersgate United Methodist Church
Sunday, January 4, 2026– Arise! Shine!
Pastor Sue McNicol

Scripture: John 1:1-18 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.



It's Epiphany Sunday or as I like to call it "Ah-Ha Sunday!" It's the 12th day after Christmas (which is actually tomorrow - January 5). In The United Methodist Church and many other Western traditions, Epiphany marks the arrival of the Magi from the East, who bring worship and gifts of devotion to the Christ Child, revealing his divinity. The Season of Epiphany runs from now until the beginning of Lent (Ash Wednesday) which falls on February 18th. It's marked by bookend events beginning with the Baptism of the Lord celebrated next Sunday and ending with the Transfiguration of the Lord on February 15. Whew! This ends our lesson on the church calendar. But Epiphany is so much more than liturgical dates and terms. It's all about God as the revealer through Jesus. In our scripture

reading today we heard “the word became flesh and lived among us... born of God.” And we’re told “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” During this season of Epiphany, we’re going to explore how and where we receive grace upon grace. Does it come neatly wrapped as a gift delivered from a wise man or woman... or do we receive grace in ways we can’t possibly begin to image.

My apologies to you who have heard this story before, but it contains a timeless message, worthy of retelling. In April 2008 I was part of a United Methodist Volunteers In Mission team serving in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. We spent a week mudding, taping and drywalling a shotgun style house (or a duplex as we refer to them in Montana) in an ordinary neighborhood. Abandoned homes are interspersed with those being refurbished, vines almost completely consuming some structures while others were beginning to show signs of life. This was the first time I heard the term “common wall neighbor.” The house we worked on had a common wall neighbor named Reggie living next door. Upon our arrival, he came out on his front porch and introduced himself and simply asked if he could offer us a blessing. Beyond that moment, we saw very little of him. I suspect he was off working long hours. On the fifth day of our labor, Reggie had a surprise in store for us. At noon he announced he had prepared a meal for us as his way of blessing us yet again for being a blessing to his community. It was terrific – roast beef, corn, rice, garlic toast and juice. He brought a plate to each of us, along with a napkin and utensils. The meal was simply presented on paper plates, with a plastic fork from Wendy’s restaurant (still in the plastic wrapper), and



we ate while seated on upturned buckets on the porch of an unfinished house on an everyday side street in New Orleans. But to each of us it was much more valuable and glorious than a feast in a fancy restaurant. Reggie clearly was not financially wealthy, but he was just as clearly a man who knows God as well as any of us, and we were humbled by the thoughtfulness and effort he put into personally providing this meal for us. It was one of those amazing events, ah-ha moments, that awakens you with the unexpected goodness of God’s people. At our orientation session prior to our mission trip, the speaker told us how much more difficult it can be to receive blessings and kindness than it is to give them.



This concept seemed a little odd to us, until we were the recipients of Reggie's blessing and kindness. We met many common wall neighbors on our trip – people connected by loyalty, pain, compassion and grace. They were no longer those sharing household common walls as the term originally refers. They were now on a journey together connected by a common love and mission. I will likely never see Reggie again, but he forever changed my perception of neighbor, friend, and service. I saw the light of Christ in Reggie's eyes that day as clearly as the Magi saw a star they just knew they had to follow. I was forever changed by this experience of God's grace shared through another's actions.



An epiphany is defined as the moment we have a life-changing, enlightening realization. While true, this also implies it's an isolated event – a moment in time. Sort of a "one and done" revelation. But I don't believe that's the definition of a spiritual epiphany. Think of it as

"epiphany" changing from being a noun to *becoming* a verb. To say "I've had an epiphany" as an isolated event is much different than suggesting we "BE an epiphany" to others. My encounter with Reggie was much more than an insular event. His actions forever changed me...changed how I AM in the world and how I see others. Reggie *was and is* a verb.

How is it we make God known? How do we become full of grace and truth, having received grace upon grace? This is what today's scripture reading is asking of us. We make God known in simple meals, exchanging handshakes and ideas, stepping outside comfort zones to get to know another and by being like Christ. *By being a verb*. You'll see on the front of your bulletin a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye entitled ***"Famous."*** I love the closing lines of this poem... "*I want to be famous to shuffling men who smile while crossing streets, sticky children in grocery lines, famous as the one who smiled back. I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous, or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular, but because it never forgot what it could do.*" Wow... famous the way a buttonhole is famous – *never forgetting what it*

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could do. Let me just say, because buttonholes do what buttonholes (and buttons) do, I'm a much more confident and comfortable person standing before you today. And I know people who are famous in "buttonhole" fashion – take for example our very own Terri, a speech and debate coach

who helps her students formulate and articulate ideas, instills confidence the way a reliable pulley instills confidence and goes about coaching by being a verb. I bet if we asked Terri, she would tell us she

receives more blessings than she gives and that epiphanies flow freely in her encounters with her amazing students.

Jesus was famous... “boots on the ground” sort of famous. Famous for seeing “the other” when no one else wanted to acknowledge them...be it the leper, or the bent over woman, or the tax collector. He was someone who might have shared a shot-gun style of house with a common wall neighbor and been so inclined to prepare a simple meal of blessing as a gift of grace. He would have made God known by being a verb...of wait... he did! Time and time again. And we do too... we just may not always define it as such. It’s what being a Christian is all about. It’s not about claiming some special title or status or fame. It’s not about telling others, “I’m a Christian,” it’s as simple as living day-to-day in Reggie fashion – blessing others, showing gratitude, sharing what we have and tearing down walls that separate us.

Have you ever wished Jesus lived today – in human flesh – and that his house was in your neighborhood? Have you thought how wonderful it would be to knock on his door and ask to come in and sit for a spell – to dialogue face-to-face and ask for his insight and direction? This is precisely what our scripture reading today tells us happens as Christ became flesh and made his dwelling in us, we become Christ in flesh to our neighbor. During this season of Epiphany, we will be exploring what it means to be Christ and serve as neighbors. We’ll BE epiphanies and share epiphanies and trust God’s grace to unfold in our midst. It will be what it’s meant to be, and we’ll grow and share in the journey together...as we too become common wall neighbors!

Famous - By Naomi Shihab Nye

The river is famous to the fish.
The loud voice is famous to silence,
which knew it would inherit the earth
before anybody said so.
The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds
watching him from the birdhouse.
The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.
The idea you carry close to your bosom
is famous to your bosom.
The boot is famous to the earth,
more famous than the dress shoe,

which is famous only to floors.
The bent photograph is famous to the one who
carries it
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.
I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.
I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything
spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.