

“Epiphany”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Epiphany – January 5, 2013

Matthew 2: 1-12
Isaiah 60: 1-6

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. It has been a joy for me to see that occur with my two daughters in the last few years. While they still get plenty excited about what they will open under the tree, I have noticed they take a greater joy in thinking through the gifts they will give to their family and friends. 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>). A moment in which you suddenly see or understand something in a new or very clear way. How are we 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 of the wise men seeing a star in the east, and coming 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://day1.org/919-the_gift_of_the_magi)

I think one of the reasons we struggle with living in joy is that we lose sight of what’s truly important in life, or we fail to offer thanks for what we have, and instead offer complaints about what we do not have. Go back to the image I began with about gift-giving at Christmas. What does it say that so many people in this country claimed their Christmas was ruined by FedEx and UPS because their packages did not arrive by Christmas Eve? Really? That’s the measure of success or enjoyment of Christmas so many wish to use? 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?

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 have the faith to believe in the epiphanies of past, present, and future, which suddenly show us the depth of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.