

## **By Another Road**

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on December 27, 2020*

Due to the pandemic, the Wise Men—being wise and all—decided not to stop at any of the rest areas along the way and therefore have arrived on the second day of Christmas instead of the twelfth day of Christmas, as is customary. So along with your two turtle doves today, you get an extra helping of gold, frankincense and myrrh. To paraphrase another wise man: Epiphany is never late nor is it early; it arrives precisely when it means to.

Epiphany falls on January 6, the twelfth day of Christmas, and the day we commonly remember the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem. In my Baptist church growing up, I had no clue that there was any kind of actual Epiphany celebration until college, when I spent a January in Germany. In Germany and in some other countries, Epiphany is a big event. Children dress up as kings and travel from door to door—much as we do on Halloween—only instead of demanding something for themselves, they collect money for the poor, remembering that the Wise Men brought gifts to the poor Christ child.

Seeing those German children out in their costumes collecting for the poor started me wondering if I wasn't missing something with this Epiphany thing. Well, the more I looked into church history, the more I realized that I was missing a lot of things. Epiphany in the early church was one of the three great feast days—second only to Easter in its importance. Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost were the focus of the church. Nobody even thought about celebrating Christmas until the fourth century. Advent was added in the fifth century.

So what's the deal? Or, as one of my seminary professors used to ask, "How come nothing epiphs on Epiphany anymore?" Why was Epiphany so important, and why is it so unimportant now?

Most know Epiphany as the day the Wise Men came. And that's right—partially. The word Epiphany means "manifestation" or "revelation." The coming of the Wise Men is celebrated as the time that Jesus as Messiah was revealed to the Gentiles. Many traditions see the Christmas story as symbolic of the spread of the Gospel—first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles; first to the poor, then to the rich; first to the ones who kept the Temple flocks in accordance with Jewish law, then to pagan astrologers, whose profession the law expressly forbid.

But Epiphany celebrates more than the Wise Men. It also celebrates the revelation of Jesus in his first miracle—changing the water into wine at Cana—and the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God at his baptism. Those three things--the Wise Men, Cana, and Jesus' baptism were all lumped together to symbolize the revelation of God in Jesus Christ—the Epiphany.

Epiphany celebrates the first signs that God gave to the world of who Jesus was; and the point of celebrating it wasn't to remember history, but to be reminded that God appears—not just then, but also now—in places and in ways that we don't expect. If God's presence was obvious, no revelation would be necessary. We'd just see something and say, "Oh, right. There's God."

The focus of the early church on Epiphany was a way of reminding us to pay close attention, lest we miss it—even, and perhaps especially, in those places and people and times when God showing up seems unlikely. Mother Teresa talked about God being revealed in what she called "the distressing

disguise of the poor.” Even the so-called Wise Men figured they only needed to find the palace to lay eyes on the baby king.

God is all around us, but in such unexpected places and people that we often need an epiphany—a revelation of some sort that opens our eyes to what we’re really seeing. But once we spot it—once God has been made manifest to us; once we have been inside the stable; once we have seen our water turned to wine; once we have seen the dove descend and recognized the Holy—we simply can’t go back the way we came. We can’t unsee what we have seen. We can’t unlive the moment. Things must be different now. The same old way will not do. To truly encounter the Word made flesh will turn us from our former way and lead us out by another road.

Now all of that sounds great until the practical implications of God roaming freely about the world changing lives start to play out.

One of the great scandals of the pandemic is that when churches had to close the doors to our buildings, people started discovering God in other places. And some of those places were very much not sanctioned by the institutional church. I mean people started finding God in atheist nurses, or out in the woods instead of our lovely sanctuaries. People started to see God’s face in migrant children and Muslim journalists. Worst of all, people started sleeping in on Sundays and finding God in virtual settings or in small, intimate gatherings at whatever day and time it suited them.

All of a sudden, the church had its hair on fire. Who let God out of the building?! Who gave God access to Zoom and YouTube?! And Facebook? Zuckerberg already thinks he’s God, and now he’s a church? Who did this?? We had God safely nailed up there at the front of the church—now look what you’ve done! There will be no going back after this!

And that’s true, but only in part. We will go back to live worship in the sanctuary, but it’s my hope and prayer that we won’t go back the way we came. I pray that we go back by another road—as a post-Epiphany congregation—a people ready to join the ranks of the first-century Messiah-watchers and all those from every place and time who have sought for God without being totally sure what finding God will look like or how it will change them. A people who have learned that God can and is revealed inside and outside the church; a people who find ourselves eager to come in to share how our own epiphanies have changed us and then go out and join the hunt for more.

The message of Christmas and confirmed on Epiphany is that God is not just out there somewhere, but here. God can be found everywhere, in anyone or anything, on any day, at any time, and through any and all media. Once we realize that, once we have seen that for ourselves, there is no going back to the way it was. We are forever changed; we follow another road.

And let’s be honest. The church as an institution has a conflict of interest here. We have a significant interest in keeping God under our watchful eye and being the arbiters of who gets to meet God and where. Too often we seek not just to introduce people to Jesus, but to manage the relationship so that every person’s experience of God looks like every other and you’ll only know how it’s supposed to go if you come to us so we can tell you.

That mindset puts us in competition with every other church, even within our own denomination, and makes our current moment a time of institutional terror. When we seek to control how people experience the divine, every epiphany that happens to every person while our doors are closed

means someone else going back by another road. Every week we are not in the building is yet another week that God gets to roam free, increasing the chances that more people will learn that the true church is a universal community of seekers and watchers instead of guardians of something too holy for most people to see.

But the cat is now out of the bag. The pandemic has provided an epiphany that has helped many people discover that the heart of God is not locked into certain buildings on Sundays. They will follow that shining heart home, because once we have encountered it for real, the pull is too strong. We must follow where it leads. But not by the old road.

Sometimes I think Epiphany is too much about the kings. It's a step in the right direction to have children dressed as kings taking up a collection for the poor. But at its heart, Epiphany is about the scandalous freedom of God's revealing, without asking the wise men first. It's about something as universally available and uncontrollable as a star in the nighttime sky being allowed to reveal the presence of God. It's about miracles happening when the wedding guests are too drunk to notice. It's about an preacher in the wilderness being dumbfounded that God has come to him for baptism instead of the other way 'round.

The institutional churches that survive this time will be those who share the journey rather than pretending to be the destination. They will be the ones who wrestle with the questions rather than pontificating about the answers. They will be the ones who maybe once thought kings had to be born in palaces, but then were not too proud to change direction and present their opulent gifts to a poor family from Nazareth.

For at least three centuries, Epiphany was more important to the church than Christmas. More important than Jesus being born was the revelation of who Jesus was, teaching a church that had to meet amidst the tombs out of fear for their lives how to recognize the face of Christ in unexpected people and places. Maybe it's time to revisit that tradition. Amen.