

## **Guided by Starlight**

TEXT: Jeremiah 29:11-14

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on January 5, 2025*

Tomorrow, January 6, is Epiphany, which marks the end of the Christmas Season. If you're singing the song, Epiphany is the twelfth day of Christmas. So, if the Wise Men brought drums, there were twelve of them, not three.

For the early years of Christianity, Epiphany wasn't the end of the Christmas Season, because Christmas wasn't celebrated until the fourth century and Christmas didn't really take off as a celebration until many centuries after that. In those early centuries of the church, Epiphany was the first of the three large Christian festivals of the Christian year, the other two being Easter and Pentecost.

Epiphany was more important than Christmas because Epiphany focused, not on the fact of a baby being born, but on the signs that showed the world just who that baby was. The word "epiphany" appears only occasionally in the Bible. One is in the book of 2 Maccabees, which is a book included in Catholic Bibles but not often in Protestant ones, where it describes the appearance of the presence of God in the first century before the birth of Jesus.

There are just six mentions of the word "epiphany" in the New Testament—one in 2 Thessalonians, four in 2 Timothy, and one in Titus. In those places the Greek word is translated as "brightness," "illumination," or "appearing," depending on the translation.

The festival of Epiphany, which began in the Greek church, celebrates the initial signs recorded in the Bible which showed that Jesus was, in some way, divine. There are two, and sometimes three, of those early events celebrated at Epiphany.

The first revelation is the coming of the Wise Men to Bethlehem. Foreign kings who traveled for years to follow a star that they discerned marked the birth of the king of the Jews, became the first "sign" that this was a special child. I think the shepherds would like a word here after their visit from the angels, but Epiphany looks the other way on them.

The second sign of Jesus' identity is 30 years later, when Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan at the outset of his ministry. Many were baptized, of course, but it was only at Jesus' baptism that Matthew 13 records a dove descending on Jesus and a voice saying, "This is my beloved Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased." Identity revealed. Second recorded sign.

For those who celebrate a third revelatory moment for Epiphany, John's Gospel steps in to tell us of Jesus' first miracle, turning the water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. They are all points of revelation; "Aha!" moments for Gospel readers; the first signs that illumine Jesus' true nature. Those "Aha!" moments; those instances of revelation that indicated the presence of God among us, in the person of Jesus, are what the festival of Epiphany highlights.

However, the general word "epiphany" is not only a religious word. We say we've had an epiphany when the truth about a person or situation finally dawns on us. It could be a religious epiphany, but doesn't have to be. Epiphanies also don't have to recognize glorious truths.

When used for people it is nicely summed up in the Maya Angelou quote, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them." The truths revealed to us in a person's actions might uncover any number of things about a person's nature, not all of which are glorious.

I've titled this sermon "Guided by Starlight," not just to reflect the Wise Men using a star in the heavens to guide them to the King of the Jews, but to indicate how I'm planning to navigate this year in worship and in

sermons. I'm hoping that we can look both out and up for our own epiphanies—to find signs that reveal God's calling on our lives and God's presence in our midst. We'll be looking for things that illumine—things that shine and point the way to where Jesus can be found, understood, and, thereby emulated. In this world. Today.

In the service last week, Laura mentioned that the theme for this year in worship would be “calling” and then led us through a reflection on three related questions. That was a really helpful exercise for me in shaping this year, and I quickly filled two pages of notes.

Those notes included the particulars of how I've felt called by God in my own life, but also included notes about how others might find those questions confusing or totally outside their experience. Starting next week, I'll try to help those of you who may have felt those things to reframe the questions in a way that connects them to your life and experiences. And maybe even today some of my experience might help.

For example, last week, when I looked over my own list of times I felt God's call on my life, I noticed they were all things I felt God had called me to **DO**. And I thought about that. In many ways, God calling us to do something is the most difficult kind of calling from God to discern, because it's different for each person and typically is different for even the same person at different ages and stages of life.

That discernment can be learned, and we'll talk about that this year, but it left out a bigger and arguably more important kind of calling: The calling not about what each of us should **do**, but about the kind of person God calls each of us to **be**.

There's overlap, of course. Maya Angelou's quote, “When someone shows you who they are, believe them,” indicates that a person's inner nature shows up in their outward actions. She didn't say, “When someone **tells** you who they are, believe them.” She said, “When someone **shows** you who they are, believe them.” I think she has that exactly right.

That said, it's much, much easier to discern the kind of person God is calling us to be, than it is to discern the specifics of what God is calling us to do. Who we are called to be is plastered all over the Bible, in both word and example, and in both the Old and the New Testaments.

And, if we can get the “who we are called to be” part right; the “what we are called to do” part becomes much easier. So, we're going to start there, with who we are all called to be, in the first part of the year and move to how that inner nature can help us figure out our own life's meaning, purpose, and calling, which is what will occupy roughly the second part of the year.

Along the way, we'll look at characters in the Bible and passages of Scripture, but also at other individuals known for their virtue and faithfulness—from ancient to modern, across all walks of life—some named as saints in the church, others whose overall goodness has made them beacons of light, despite whatever human failings they no doubt possessed.

By looking at their lives, we can find clues about how we might cultivate those virtues in ourselves, and see how an inner nature shaped by those virtues can change our outlook on life, our relationships with others, and perhaps even change the world in which we live.

To kick that off, I want to leave you this morning with a contemporary example of a man, whose century of service will be lauded across all of this month. I mean, of course, Jimmy Carter.

Former President Jimmy Carter holds a special place in my heart, as he burst onto the scene just as I was coming into adulthood. In 1976, during his winning campaign for the Presidency, I was still just 17 and couldn't vote for him; but I was so taken with him that I campaigned for him on my college campus, and convinced many of my friends who could vote for him to do so.

I was still in the fundamentalist stage of my faith at that point, and after the scandals of Nixon, it was a wonder to me that a peanut farmer from a tiny, mostly-black town in Georgia, who openly talked about being a born-again Christian, was running for the highest office in the land.

Even more amazing to me was that in everything written about him—and there was a lot, since he had already served as Governor of Georgia—no one could produce anything to suggest that the persona we saw on the campaign trail was anything other than who he actually was: Down to earth, intellectually brilliant, devoted to God, devoted to his wife, humble, caring about every other person on the planet, as well as the planet itself—Jimmy Carter installed solar panels at the White House to power the water heating in the staff kitchen and highlight the need for renewable energy. Reagan had them removed.

The worst scandal of Carter's presidency was when, in an interview with Playboy magazine, Carter confessed to lusting after another woman in his heart. Oh, for those days! He was married to Rosalyn for 77 years. When asked later about his greatest accomplishment, he didn't name becoming President, the Camp David Accords, or winning the Nobel Peace Prize. He named marrying Rosalyn.

They tried to manufacture dirt about Jimmy Carter by pointing out the failings of his younger brother, Billy, who had an alcohol addiction that led to outrageous behavior and landed him in rehab. Billy also had some questionable relationships with Libya, and reporting on what came to be called Billygate, was later found to be a foreign influence campaign trying to interfere with the 1980 election. Sound familiar?

Jimmy Carter lost the 1980 election to Ronald Reagan, but his return to the life of a mere citizen became an even clearer lens for his true nature. On the faith front, Jimmy Carter was a Southern Baptist and taught an adult Sunday School class at his Baptist church in Plains, Georgia for almost 70 years, including the years he was in the White House.

Over time he grew upset with the Southern Baptist Church, troubled by their continued unwillingness to accept women in leadership. He made a formal break with the denomination 25 years ago. His own church in Plains was part of the more moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which Carter helped establish.

Whatever you thought of his actual presidency and policies, I don't believe there has ever been a better human being to sit in the Oval Office. I encourage you to listen to the various tributes that are already being published and that will be both published and spoken across this month, especially this Thursday, which has been established as a National Day of Mourning for him.

But don't just read or listen to them to learn facts about his life; look at those facts through the lens of what it means to be a Christian. If you applied Maya Angelou's test of "When someone shows you who they are, believe them," who did Jimmy Carter show himself to be? Ask yourself that as you read, watch, and listen.

There are countless amazing stories from his life, but I'll highlight just a few that show me who he was:

Of course there's the Sunday School teacher. But it wasn't just teaching Sunday School, it was the little things surrounding that. First, across my 30 years in ministry, lots of people have told me they don't have time to teach Sunday School. Jimmy Carter taught Sunday School when he was President of the United States. And, he still did it in his home church in Plains, Georgia.

He could have moved his class to DC and no one would have batted an eye. But then the people he knew in Plains could not have come. Thirty to thirty-five times a year, he still went to Plains and taught 45-minute Sunday School lessons at the Maranatha Baptist Church where he grew up.

Hundreds came from all across the country every time he was teaching. As Carter waited for his time to come to the podium, he sat in a folding chair in the corner. He would allow anyone who wanted to take pictures with him after the class, but he would not sign autographs there. And no applause was allowed.

Before Jimmy Carter served his country as President, he served his country as an officer in the Navy, something he'd wanted since before the first grade. He graduated with distinction from the US Naval Academy in 1946. When Admiral Rickover began his program to create nuclear-powered submarines, Carter wanted in and was selected to assist "in the design and development of nuclear propulsion plants for naval vessels."

Although the Chalk River Nuclear Plant was in Ottawa, Canada it produced about half of the North American supply of medical isotopes. That use, plus the plant's physical proximity to the US made the meltdown in the reactor core on December 12, 1952 a national security issue for the US. Jimmy Carter, at age 28, was selected to lead a team of 26 men to do the hazardous repair and cleanup. It was the first nuclear reactor meltdown ever.

With the clock ticking, they trained on a duplicate model reactor on the site, since each man would have only 90 seconds to do their part of the job, once lowered into the reactor. Carter took his 90-second turn with all the others, and had himself lowered into the damaged reactor. He and his team exposed themselves to a thousand times the level of radiation considered safe by today's standards.

He had wanted a career in the Navy since his earliest years. He got it. He loved it. Rosalyn was happy. But his father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, shortly after the nuclear incident. By July of 1953, his father had died; and Carter sadly decided to give up his Navy dream to return to Plains and manage the family's peanut farm. A George Bailey move, if there ever was one.

We know about his presidency, about the peace he brokered between Israel and Egypt, and about the Nobel Peace Prize. His post-presidential work with Habitat for Humanity is so well known that almost every cartoon published since his passing has him physically building homes for others in heaven; and almost every set of photos includes the one of Carter, at 95 years old, his face badly banged up from a fall that needed 14 stitches, still out swinging a hammer and building homes—right beside Rosalyn.

Those who worked on homes with him, as well as reporters who went to those job sites, have testified that he was always the first to arrive and the last to leave a work site. Those were not photo-ops. The Carters were always offered a nice room to sleep in on those jobs. And they always gave it to others, while they slept on the floor of a local church with the other volunteers.

Less known is Jimmy Carter's work, through the Carter Center, on public health, especially on common but horrific diseases like guinea worm and river blindness found only in sub-Saharan Africa. While I forget who did the interview, sometime in the last decade Carter was asked what his goals were now that he was entering his 90's. What did he hope his legacy might be? He answered that he wanted to outlive the last guinea worm. He wanted the disease totally eradicated.

Here's a brief description of the guinea worm parasitic infection by Brian Klaas: "The infections come from stagnant water, in which the worms lay their larvae, but the worms mature *inside* the human body. Over the course of a year, an infected person eventually plays host to a worm that grows to become one meter (3.3 feet) long.

"Once fully grown, the worm creates a lesion on the skin and then escapes from the body, usually producing agonizing pain in the process. Most of the time, these worms exit through the legs or the feet...Fully removing the worm can take days or weeks. It's extremely painful, and often leads to secondary infections. Most people who get sick are debilitated for weeks or months, and some develop permanently disabling joint pain."

When Carter decided to take on the guinea worm in the mid 1980's there were just under four million infections each year across 21 countries. In 2023 that number was 13. Not 13 countries, 13 cases—down from almost four million As of the time of his passing one week ago, there were 7 in all of 2024. Not quite zero, but almost.

Doing that work paid him zero in tangible returns. The headlines this week aren't lauding his work fighting guinea worms. He got no social capital from that. He didn't own stock in a guinea worm pharmaceutical or medical device company. He got no awards for it, no recognition, nor did he expect or even want any of those things.

Jimmy Carter didn't focus on the guinea worm because a friend or relative had been debilitated by it or because it was a threat either in Georgia or here in the US. He focused on it simply because millions were suffering from it, and no one seemed to care. His faith taught him that. Jesus taught him that—to care for the least, the last, and the lost.

Read the tributes. Watch the speeches and services. As you do so, ask yourself what shapes a man like that. There are not many of them. Talk about his life with your children and grandchildren, especially your boys. There is such a crisis right now surrounding what it means to be a man.

If allowing yourself to be lowered into the melted core of a nuclear reactor, teaching Sunday School and living those values, becoming President, being faithful to your spouse for 77 years—lusting in your heart not withstanding—and then spending the 44 years of your post-presidential life volunteering to build houses for those who have none, sleeping on the floor, and raising money to eradicate painful diseases for those you don't know and will never meet—if all that isn't a shining example of manhood, I don't know what is.

The world is starved for such men; and men are starved for such examples. Let your children and grandchildren see such a person lauded for a life well-lived, lying in state in our nation's capital. Let your sons and your daughters know that they can do it, too. Let them know that's one version of what it means to follow Jesus.

Let the light from Jimmy Carter's star guide you this month. His star, like the star that guided the Wise Men, will lead you to the exact same place. Amen.