

Jan. 3, 2021 Epiphany

Welcome, friends, to our first Sunday worship in 2021. We celebrate today the feast of Epiphany, when the Wise Ones journeyed from the East, and arrived following the star to see this baby in a manger.

Martin Luther had a marvelous insight and comment about Scripture itself. He said, 'The Bible is really like the manger--it holds the baby, but what matters is the baby, not the Book [of the Bible], but how its word, its significance, its life, becomes life within us, life among us, and life lived for the sake of the world. How profound and essential that insight is today.

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We begin in the name of God, Abba/ Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Gracious God, with those who had the courage to journey a great distance to an unknown wisdom and outcome we pray, give us this day that same courage and wisdom in Christ's name. It's not about a Book. It's about vital life.

Let us begin in the name of God, Abba / Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Oh God, as the wise ones of ancient times were willing to leave the familiar and enter into the destiny unknown, so we pray, give us in these times the courage and wisdom we need to make life new in you now. In Christ's name we pray.

The first lesson from prophet Jeremiah, chapter 31 [31:7-9]

God says this: Shout for joy! Proclaim! Praise! Shout! God will save the people. Watch, God says, and I shall bring them back from far distant lands. I will gather the scattered people from the far ends of the earth. With them will come the blind, and the lame, women with child, women in labor, all together they shall come; a mighty throng will return. In tears they will return, they shall come home, and, in prayer, I shall lead them. I will guide them to streams of flowing water, by a smooth path where the people will no longer stumble.

Thank you, Jeremiah!

And from Ephesians, chapter 3. [3: 1-

I, Paul, a prisoner for the Lord, have written to the Gentiles on the behalf of all. I wish to share with you my perceptions about the understanding of the mystery of Christ. This mystery, as it is now revealed by the Holy Spirit, has come to apostles and prophets. It was unknown to humanity in previous generations, but now has been proclaimed by Christ through the gospel. I have been made a servant of the gospel by gift of grace given to me to reveal the workings of God's power among us. I am the least of all God's people, but I have been entrusted with this grace of

proclaiming to all the unfathomable treasure of Christ, and of throwing light on the inner workings of the mystery kept hidden through all these ages. God, the creator of everything, has made this known to us, and the purpose was that now through the church, the principalities, and ruling forces, the governing powers of this world, should finally learn how many faceted are the size and aspects of God's wisdom among us.

This is my calling to you.

The gospel for today is from Matthew, chapter 2.

After Jesus had been born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod, suddenly some wise ones came to Jerusalem from the East, asking, 'Where is the infant King of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and have come to do him homage.' When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem.

Herod called together the chief priests and scribes, and inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him at Bethlehem in Judea. This is what the prophet wrote, 'You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least among the tribes, for from you will come a leader who will shepherd my people, Israel.'

Herod then summoned the Wise Ones to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem with the words, 'Go and find out all about this child, and when you have found him, let me know, so that I, too, may come to do him homage.'

Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out, and suddenly the star they had seen rising went forward, and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight. And going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling on their knees, they paid him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But, they were given a warning in a dream not to go back to Herod, and so they returned to their own country by a different way.

The Word of God.

That doing homage is a way of acknowledging the great mystery--things which are beyond us and unfathomable can at least receive our attention.

In the name of God, the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tradition has it that the Wise Ones were from the Orient, and the first thing that happened to them is that they became dis-oriented. They were called to journey to an unknown place with an unknown outcome.

In 1985, I made my second journey to India. It was brave of Bev to let me go, with encouragement. I spent the whole month of December, the season of Advent, at Bede Griffiths' Ashram near Trichinopoly, India. It's called Sacchidananda Ashram. He was a Catholic priest who was creating interfaith community, and people of all faith traditions--which India is overflowing with--were on retreat there: Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, the gamut.

One of the most amazing things that we experienced everyday was at the morning meditation, about 5:30 in the morning. We would gather for Eucharist and all were invited to the table. Some chose to come, feeling deeply honored that they, too, were invited. because it is the Lord's table. Others did not participate, as a way of honoring as well, saying, 'This mystery belongs to others, but I am privileged to be here.'

It was this experience of that Advent season and Christmas at Sacchidananda Ashram which gave me knowledge exposure would eventually confidence and a sense of expanding creativity about who the body of Christ actually is, so that it also gave me, frankly, the courage to risk saying 'This is how we, as a community of Christ, need to live.' I returned and brought that experience, and, meeting the openness of heart among many Peace members, we discovered together how this could become part of the fabric of our identity--welcoming and affirming Interfaith participation in our membership and in our commitments this community.

In like fashion, our commitment to LGBTQ people and affirming their participation in our life is part of the fabric of how Peace has grown. You can't take these things from us, or creative worship, that we will find new ways to discover that very Word of Life speaking, dancing, singing to us. It's part of the fabric of Who We Are.

It feels as though so much has fallen apart of this past year of 2020. Without a doubt, we are disoriented. We pray for Covid relief, of course, and vaccines to come. But, if we in this year rushed back to the world as we knew it, we are fools. Imitating the past will get us nowhere. Refusing to create a new future will get us nowhere. We will abandon our human and spiritual responsibilities. How shall we go on this journey into an unknown outcome?

One thing is clear: our individualistic assertion of self has cost us a great deal, and Covid has made it even clearer. So many, many, many, people are overcome and overwhelmed by loneliness. It is time to risk opening our hearts, to renew a sense of warmth among us in our human connections.

The Christmas baby--and the very heart of this story--is that the Christmas baby let go of power and equality with God to become one of us, that becoming human was not a disappointment to Jesus. By joining us, he made real God's passion for gathering the lost, and the forgotten, and the disposable. None are outside the embrace of God.

He was forging a new future among us, and that pathway is love, not the affectation of love--the love which seeks the well-being of the other. As much as I want it for myself, I want it for you, too. This love is a gift, not of something, some philosophy, some theology. This love is a gift of some one--each one of us who must embody that listening, and that willingness to be involved and to care.

The Eucharist is our chief expression of that. It is the Eucharist which creates the community, the Eucharist which makes space for all. All are invited, all can participate. None are outsiders to Christ. And in this Eucharist, it is we who become bread broken for a hungry world.

Our spiritual goal can no longer be individual self-fulfillment. Rather, what is breaking open now is mutual transformation--the receiving of gifts of others, and the offering of the gift of ourselves. That mutual transformation is desperately needed for the healing and renewing our world. Christian faith is all about gathering into community, always gathering in as Christ said--like a hen gathering the chicks under her wings--always gathering together. In fact, it also is about gathering those who are unrelated, and those who are unlovable...and that includes us, too.

Christmas celebrates the Incarnation, that this is becoming human and real. This Gathering God has become a person in Jesus. Love is personalized through a human person, our personhood is being awakened by that of Christ. Like a child that we can hold, he invites us to care for him, as we care for each other, because human beings cannot live in isolation. How well we know that now, don't we? And it is this personalizing unity in love, which is our calling. We are called to make this real. Not some abstract concept of unity--people getting along--[but] personalized unity and love, seeking the well-being of each other. That's the future.

When we see ourselves as part of the whole, we care for one another. That's why this makes such a difference. What the Eucharist is reminding us again, and again--that we belong to each other, we belong to God, we belong to life. It's that we can think and act in concert with the communion of life. It becomes unbearable to be ignorant of that.

The Christ life is all about more--more compassion, more ^{18:24} politeness, more spirit. It is embracing this, including enemies, indigenous people. And we can use the word 'marginalized' to address women, or people of other religions who are taken advantage of. ^{18:50}Some of this ??she says?? may sound like a foreign language, and in some ways is, and it is meant to because we are trying to open our eyes to things we haven't seen or wanted to perceive.

Doesn't that sound like a journey for Wise Ones--reading the heavens, not knowing what it means? Still they had the courage to pursue, to be dis-oriented in order to reorient themselves to a Child, to a new reality, to love in their hearts perhaps they had not known before.

I ask and urge your prayerful consideration, participating in and opening our hearts this Epiphany season, that all of us together may become wiser in God's grace and presence and compassion.

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Let us pray.

Source of all life, mystery of the cosmos and our own being, we open our hearts to your Spirit, that in this new decade we may be filled and transformed by the graces we need, that we might recognize you in one another, that we might, together with the people of your earth and this community, be transformed by that compassion which has no end. As Christ emptied himself to become human, so may we empty ourselves of everything that is not you, to receive that peace and community which the world cannot give. We pray in Christ's name. Amen

May the Lord bless you and keep you, make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen.