

Well I guess with the advent of 2010, officially,  
our fiftieth anniversary celebration is over.

However, I would like to extend it one week,  
and I think as a preacher, I can take that liberty.

Today is a special day for our congregation.

This evening/morning, we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> festival of Epiphany  
as Epiphany Lutheran Church.

This is also known as the twelfth day of Christmas or the festival of light.

For our church this day holds special meaning.

Just over 50 years ago, a small group of folks selected this celebration  
to be our congregation's name.

I can tell you growing up in this church;

I never really thought much of that or any of its significance.

Even as a seminary student,

I never thought much about it.

Until one day, our name was brought to my attention during a preaching class.

One of my most beloved professors was a rather snarky,  
older fellow who wore a lot of seer sucker and smoked a pipe.

Keep in mind; I went to seminary in South Carolina

– where seer sucker is always in fashion.

And the pipe, well, it just added to his snarkiness.

One day in class I mentioned the name of my home church,

Epiphany and he says to me,

“Huh, you're from epi phani.”

I must have looked at him like a deer caught in the headlights.

I had no idea what he was talking about.

Then he said to me, “You know you're Greek, preacher,

that's epi-phani, epi and phaino. Right?”

Right. Or as I learned to say in the south, “Yes, sir.”

And right he was.

Although I wasn’t fast enough that day to say anything back  
that could have even remotely been considered intelligent.

The root words that make up our congregation’s name are epi

– which is a preposition

that means about twenty different things including on, near and upon.

And phaino, a verb that describes light shining or an appearance.

Hence, epi-phany or Epiphany as most people say.

Upon a light shining.

We are a prepositional phrase. Who cares, right?

Makes me think of a light bulb going off in our heads.

Or maybe of a star shining in the sky to mark the birth of a newborn king.

As was the case in the first epiphany that we celebrate today.

That first epiphany –

the first revelation of the Christ child to people outside the church –  
is the story that we remember today.

Matthew’s account of this journey is our text assigned for this celebration.

This much-loved story has been depicted in a variety of ways  
throughout the centuries.

Now, sometimes when we have familiar stories like this one,

it can be difficult for us to look at them with fresh eyes

in order to hear what is really there

separated from what has been added to it over the years.

This story is one that people have been tampering with

over the last two-thousand years with the best of intentions.

For starters, there is no evidence that there were three of them.

Check it out in Matthew's gospel.

There are three gifts mentioned, but not three persons.

You may have learned that their names are Caspar, Melchoir and Blathasar.

That's not in the story, either.

The wisemen probably didn't know the shepherds,

those are two different stories.

So what is left?

We know they were from a distant land.

We know they practiced some kind of magic and astrology.

And we know they were certainly men.

And we know this last point because if they had been women

they would have asked for directions.

They would have been there in time to help deliver the baby.

They would have cleaned Mary's house

and would have brought casseroles instead of frankincense.

That we know for sure.

Well, maybe I embellished just a little bit.

Anyway, we do know they were wise folks that came from a distant place.

We know they were people living outside the church.

They practiced some type of magic or sorcery

and were experts at studying the stars.

They read the stars for guidance instead of scriptures.

We even know that because of their sorcery and magic,

they would not have been permitted into the church.

According to the eighteenth chapter of Deuteronomy,

their practices were detestable.

Anyone that participated in such fortune telling with the stars

and other soothsaying was not permitted in the church.

They were a disgrace and, according to Deuteronomy,  
the Lord was busy at work driving them out.

Instead of trusting people that relied on casting spells,  
the ancient Israelites were waiting for a prophet.

A prophet who would lead better than Moses,  
prophesy greater than Elijah,  
and be more powerful than David.

For generations, they had been waiting for God  
to fulfill his promise and send a Messiah to them.

And then these non-religious-practicing people  
come from almost out of nowhere

to Jerusalem and say that a child has been born who is the King of the Jews.  
This should not make sense to anyone.

These are the last people that anyone would expect  
to be making this birth announcement.

The ancient Israelites have been waiting for this news,  
not foreigners who aren't a part of the religious establishment.

This would have been expected to come through maybe the scribes  
who were associated with the Pharisees, a group inside the church.

They were the experts on civil law in the Hebrew Bible, our old testament.

These people knew the scriptures inside and out.

We would expect those who know the most about scripture  
to be the ones first marking the birth of Jesus.

That would have been fair, you see to these Pharisees.

Or if not to the scribes,

then maybe this announcement would come through the chief priests.

They were the ruling class of the Saducees, another church group.

Even though they were church leaders,

they didn't believe in the resurrection.

That's why they were sad, you see. I know, boo...

We would expect God to send the Messiah to them first  
to counteract their beliefs.

But no, instead, Jesus' birth is announced by a group of magicians  
who have no business recognizing the signs of his birth.

They live without scriptures  
and outside of the laws that govern the people of Jerusalem.

And yet they go to that sacred city following the star.

Here, they ask about this child they have predicted through astrological signs.

Everyone is afraid – King Herod, and all people of Jerusalem.

But what is amazing, is that here in Jerusalem,  
the best of worldly powers and God's Word intersect.

Here in Jerusalem, God's Word

– the promise of a ruler, born in Bethlehem  
– and the best of worldly powers in creation intersect.

God uses signs and wonders in a star to reach these wisemen, outside of the church.

God uses any means possible.

And then their prediction is verified  
by the scribes and the chief priests,  
the best of the leaders inside the church.

And the result is the same,

God introduces the world to his long awaited, incarnate Son.

From the beginning of Jesus' life,  
God is uniting groups that would have otherwise been apart.

God is tearing down walls of division  
in favor of people coming together.

In Jesus, God is busy dismantling our divisions

and reaching out to new groups.

Here in history – in the town Bethlehem during the time of King Herod,

God is busy and active uniting people

and drawing in outsiders in order to expand the kingdom of God.

This is what God does.

Throughout the gospel of Matthew,

Jesus' ministry will be to those who seem to be

outside of God's realm of possibility.

All the way to the very end.

And this might be a familiar statement to us.

As a congregation, we have selected the end of Matthew's gospel

for our guiding mission.

Following his own death and resurrection,

Jesus returns to his disciples,

tells them that he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.

And because of that they are to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).

They are to make disciples of all nations, no exceptions listed.

Even those formerly not a part of the church.

Even those that have been cast aside and unworthy.

Trusting that through this disciple making,

Jesus is busy and active bringing together those outside of the church.

Trusting that through them,

Jesus is starting relationships with people that don't know him.

And God issues the same invitation to us today.

God still calls us to make disciples,

to trust that through our teaching and baptizing

that he is uniting people to him and to each other.

Just like he first did for us when someone first introduced us to Christ.

When someone first took us to church,  
Held our hand or carried us at our baptism,  
walked with us as we learned Scripture.  
Or as someone is doing for us now  
as we continue to learn about God,  
about his holy Word,  
about his redeeming and life giving love for us that he so freely offers.  
About his forgiveness that he pours out upon us  
as he feeds us in the communion meal.

Just like the wisemen,  
Once we have been brought to Christ we cannot undo the experience.  
Once they got to Bethlehem and met the living Lord,  
the wisemen could never undo meeting Christ.  
They met Christ, the worshipped and then God came to them in a dream.  
God came to them in a dream  
and warned them to go home a different way.  
Before God spoke to them through the stars,  
but now something has changed.  
They have been seen the light!  
Not just the light of the star, but the light of Christ.  
They have seen the light and God has changed them.  
The wisemen cannot go back to their lives the same.  
Having a Christ encounter changes who they are from the inside out.  
And the same still holds.  
God is still busy and active in our history changing us.  
God still comes to us in ways that we can hear,  
sometimes unexpectedly.  
But other times through scripture, through worship and through one another.

We cannot undo the experience of encountering Christ –  
or I guess I should say  
we cannot undo the experience of Christ encountering us,  
in any way that gets our attention even if it's through the stars.

Like the wisemen, we cannot go back to a time without knowing Christ.

The wise guys couldn't undo their encounter with the living God  
and we can't either.

It's as simple as that.

God gets a hold of us and doesn't let go.

And then invites to be a part of getting a hold of others.

And may even surprise us along the journey.

While I was writing this sermon,

I did an internet search of pictures of the Epiphany.

This familiar story has been captured in a variety of art over the centuries.

I thought I might be able to find something new and different  
through an artist's interpretation.

But, I couldn't find anything particularly inspirational.

That is until I was handed a Christmas card from one of our families here at Epiphany.

The front of the card depicted three cartoon wisemen  
with the caption, "We heard, we saw, we believed."

How true for them and how true for us.

Here in this place, at Epiphany, we hear God's story and we see his light.

Through that God helps us to believe.

And together we are changed.

Christ's light shines upon us – we are Epiphany this is our identity.

This is who we are.

We are called to be God's light shining to others.

God invites us to reach out to those not a part of the church

in anyway that gets their attention.

Maybe that will be through sports ministries.

Maybe it will be through a child friendly entrance.

Maybe through a warm gathering space or a dry worship space.

Maybe through a smile or a handshake

Perhaps even an invitation when that is appropriate.

But it will certainly be with God coming to us,

changing us and calling to go to all nations.

Using any means possible to carry Christ's light into the world.

After all, that is who we are, it's our identity.

Epiphany is a prepositional phrase, right?

“Upon a light shining.”

Our name describes how we do what we do – not what we do.

Our mission is to reach out to others with all that we have.

Trusting that Christ's light shines through us and upon these ministries.

And through us, God is reaching out to others,

showing them the way,

bringing them to meet his Son.

May our Epiphany lights shine for all to see. Amen.