

Epiphany

The Rev. Ian Burch

St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

January 8, 2023

Last week, I said that over the next few months, I'm going to try to use this time in the pulpit to name some of the things I think I am seeing in our church and do a bit of speculating on our future. So, it's possible that some of these sermons will be a bit of a departure from what you've come to expect over the last seven years, but I think dusting off our creativity once in a while isn't a bad thing.

Today is the feast of the Epiphany. Well, it was a couple of days ago, but we observe it on the closest Sunday. You might remember from English class the Shakespeare play *Twelfth Night*—that title is an allusion to Epiphany, it being the day after the twelve days of Christmas have expired. So, you might say that Epiphany sort of closes out the twelve days of the Christmas season. If Christmas is the day that Jesus is born, Epiphany is the day we talk about the wise men who followed a star from a foreign country to find and pay homage to the child king Jesus. Epiphany is an old greek verb that means “to show” or “to manifest” and generally it refers to the way the star of Bethlehem shows the way to Jesus.

Which is all well and good, but what does it have to do with us?

I'm going to take a bit of a left turn and tell you about some sleepless nights I've had lately. Over the last couple of years, I have had a pattern of waking up at about 4 in the morning and worrying about our church. For a while there, I would wake up and worry about masks and common cups and gathering together—should we? shouldn't we? Fielding an email from a parishioner who thinks we are together too much. Then fielding an email from a parishioner who thinks we aren't together enough. What about our older members who are more susceptible to COVID? What about people who are isolated and need the community that the church offers? What about people who really hate zoom? But as the crisis parts of the pandemic have shifted, I have spent those sleepless hours worrying about our building project instead. I lie there in the dark and worry about money, about the best sequence of events, about the transition time, and about what will happen to this community if we don't act decisively to address decades of problems. I can't say it's a terribly enjoyable way to spend the hours of 4-6 am.

But, sometimes an epiphany can come in the middle of the night. Sometimes, you can see a star in the darkness. And as I was lying there a few days ago, I was thinking about the wise men. Kings and magicians who were accustomed to looking at signs in the sky. In our nativity sets, they are always portrayed as static, as statues frozen in their fancy clothes with gifts outstretched to the little baby Jesus.

But in the story, they are not static at all. They are brave. They hide important information from Herod who was looking to come and kill the baby Jesus. They escape the palace and skeedaddle over to Bethlehem. They are spies and double agents. They are disruptors and traitors to their own regime. Their entire story is one of immediacy and action. And, here we are, years later, calling them wise.

So, as I look at our parish in the year of our Lord 2023, I'm wondering what actions we need to take that will help us be wise. Tradition often numbers the wise men at 3. But the actual bible story doesn't say how many there were. We have 290 people listed in our parish database, so I don't see why we shouldn't have 290 wise people in our community, taking decisive action that helps us get a little closer to Jesus. Why can't we all follow the star to Bethlehem? Why can't we all be just as brave and bold as the wise men?

I see a couple of actions that we could take as a community. You'll see an advertisement for some friendship dinner groups in the next few weeks. They are small groups that will meet for dinner and fellowship over the next few months. Take a leap of faith and sign up either as a host or as a participant. Who knows who you will meet? Who knows what deepening of faith could be on the other side of the table from you? As our church grows bigger, we must at the same time grow smaller so that we can connect with co-travelers on this strange and wonderful religious journey. Here's another action you could take: tell a friend about your parish. Tell them about the ways seekers encounter the story of Jesus here at St. Mark's. Tell them how this is a haven for believers and doubters, for old and young, for rich and poor, for every kind of person that God sees fit to bring into these red doors. And tell your friends how church has changed your life. And lastly, help a neighbor. Look around the pews and see how you can be of service to your fellow parishioner. Maybe someone needs a ride. Maybe someone needs to bend an ear. Maybe someone needs a break from their child for an afternoon, and you remember how to change a diaper. I don't know what it is, but share one another's burdens, because that is what church is. Maybe these actions don't seem as exciting or as big as the espionage of the wise men in our story. And that is okay—our church has plenty of big, bold decisions ahead of us. But if our community is strong, those actions aren't quite as scary. The wise men definitely went out on a limb, but they did it together, just as we will.

So, as I think about the three kings—and I like to think that at least one of them was a queen in one way or another—I'm reminded that, even though they had some stressful and sleepless nights, they managed to get up, get together, and take some pretty dramatic actions to follow the star. And I happen to think that a star is currently hanging over our church, begging us to follow it. So let us take action together, knowing that future generations will hopefully call us wise. Amen.