

Another Road

Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Epiphany - January 8, 2023

Texts: Psalm 27, Matthew 2:1-12

Psalm 27, adapted

Love is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

Love is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;

though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the Holy One, that will I seek after:

to live in the heart of Love all the days of my life,

to behold the beauty of the Creator, to know the Maker's plan.

For I will be hidden in God's shelter in the day of trouble.

and protected under the cover of the Blessed One.

Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me,

and I will offer sacrifices with shouts of joy;

I will sing and make melody to the Beloved.

Hear, O God, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

'Come,' my heart says, 'seek God's face!'

Your face, Beloved, do I seek. Do not hide yourself from me.

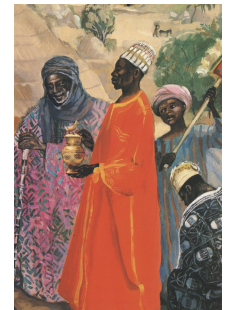
Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord

in my own lifetime.

Be strong, and let your heart take courage;

wait for the Lord!



GOSPEL READING

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."' Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



Epiphany: A strange moving star. A long journey from a distant land. A false start with a puppet ruler puffed up on his own power. Foreign seekers finally track down a baby who's supposed to be king over this odd little group of stubborn oppressed people called the Jews. What relevance could this infant possibly have for the wise guys? But when they find him, they are overwhelmed with joy, with shining hope. They experience an epiphany, a sudden realization of a truth that's actually been a long time coming. This is the Light that has guided them all along. They go home by another road. They go home changed. What changed them? An epiphany.

What is Epiphany? In Christian tradition, the season of Epiphany memorializes the light of Christ spread over the wide world. In recent centuries, mission mostly meant going into far lands and conquering them for Christ. Sometimes by love and genuine care. Sometimes by violence, as in the Native American boarding schools, and the enslaved Africans. "Let them suffer now for their eternal salvation," was the rationale. Probably not too many of them were overwhelmed with joy. Unless and until they were changed by a true epiphany and met God personally.

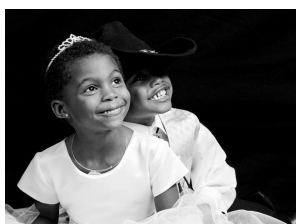


We all experience epiphanies of various sorts. "Aha" moments. During these next weeks, I invite you to think about your own epiphanies, about those times when your vision suddenly cleared. Maybe someone from another culture, or faith tradition, sparked this epiphany. Later in Epiphany, maybe you'll share your story.



Let me give you an example, a story I've told many times, because it changed me. As a half-baked pastor, I was selected to be the intern at Cabrini Green in Chicago. It's hard to imagine the desolation of that rundown housing project in the early 90s. Forbidding half-empty, gang-controlled highrise buildings. Swing set frames with no swings, their chains having been stolen for purposes you don't even want to imagine. Sunday church was one thing, when the pews were filled with men and women dressed in their best, and with little children who had come on their own, no parents in sight. Joyful Gospel music, fervent, spontaneous prayer.

To enter the next door highrise for my first home visit was another matter. No working elevators. Hallways dim because lightbulbs had been shot out or stolen. No numbers on the doors. How was I supposed to bring the light of Christ in this darkness? I didn't know where I was going myself. In the gloom I heard running feet. Coming toward me. I froze.



Two children with their arms stretched wide: "The Lord be with you!" they called. What could I say? "And also with you!" They flung their arms around me: Reggie and Karen, aged seven and nine. They knew me from church. They welcomed me. They shone the Christlight for me. This was my epiphany. I didn't need to bring God to the projects. God was here waiting for me. As

God is already present in every land and every place. Sometimes we're so dazzled by our own brilliance we fail to see the light already shining in the darkness. Our ignorance blinds us to the light of God that enlightens everyone, the presence of God in others, arms stretched wide to welcome us.

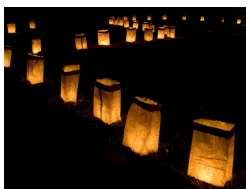


Something similar happened to me in Guatemala. In 2003, I was part of a church delegation to a small community in Guatemala. Chichipate was a poor farming village, far from any urban center. They had electricity only when they ran a generator, they lived in houses with packed earth floors, built literally of loosely woven sticks the better to let the air flow through. Most spoke only Q'eqchi, their native language. They were poor, but they were also generous, loving, thoughtful, full of laughter and wisdom. They produced astonishing music on handmade native instruments. They were well-informed about world events. Everyone shared, no one went hungry. No one had much, but everyone worked for what they had.



True, their church was Catholic and we were Lutherans, but that wasn't too much of a stretch. What surprised us was their reverence for the traditional Q'eqchi spiritual practices, which blended seamlessly with their Christian beliefs. The depth of their faith put us to shame. Don Carlos, the catechist holding the chalice, said, "In 1967 I was married in the church and I accepted wholeheartedly that God exists and lives within us. But until now, at the age of 63, I never met foreigners who would come to stay with us in our homes. I'm so happy I'm here to share what I have with you." Who was the missionary on this "mission trip?" Not me, that's for sure.

Wherever in the world we may go, we don't bring God; we meet God, God running toward us, arms outstretched, carrying the light already present, shining like a guiding star. Will we recognize the true Light when we encounter it? I think that requires letting go of our need to be perfectly right, and opening ourselves to what others know. Like Don Carlos, we each have our own unique and personal experience of the God who exists and lives within us all. Then we try to bring the highest and best of what is in us as our gift to others. We offer what we know, not with words, but with love in action. And we feel an instant kinship with those who share this quest.



Many lights mark the path that leads to oneness in the Spirit. Each of you shines in your own way, with your own special truth, your own unique connection with God. God, the Beloved, who is so much more than any single person or idea or faith. The light shining through you makes you one luminous pointer amidst a multitude.

Remember those whose lights have guided you. When did you experience your epiphanies, your "aha" moments? When did your life turn to join the river of light that flows to the one unknowable God? When did you take another road, like the Wise Men who went home changed? Maybe it's something that happened over time, or something



you recognized only after the fact. Or maybe you're still following your star, in search of an epiphany. Take these weeks of winter to wonder, to ponder.

To help you, I invite you to receive a Star Word, a word that comes at random, by coincidence, by grace. Those of you at home, I hope you received them in the mail this week. May it change your life in the year to come.

MEDITATION ON STAR WORDS

The season of Epiphany holds the time between Christmas and Lent. If you would like me to choose a Star Word at random and send it to you, I will do that. Or open a book and find a word that speaks to you. Print it, put it on your bathroom mirror or refrigerator door where you'll see it and reflect on it daily. On Epiphany of 2024, take time to remember and perhaps share how your Star Word has helped guide you through the year.



Image credits:

From **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN:

Three Wise Men visit the baby Jesus, from 20th century China.

Visit of the Three Wise Men, JESUS MAFA, from 20th century Cameroon.

Shining Hope, Lauren Wright Pittman, 2016

The Light that Shatters the Darkness, Mike Moyers, 2011

Chichipate, Guatemala

My personal collection

All others in the public domain.

Prayers

Amazing God, thank you for going ahead of us in the world, waiting for us in places we didn't expect. May we, like the Wise Ones, humbly seek you in places we have never been, and worship you there. At the same time, remind us that your Light shines in us and through us when we truly seek you, and honor you with our love and worship. May we light the path for others who are seeking. We thank you for seeding the soil with all that we need for your spiritual health and life. May we also cultivate the ground where you have placed us. Loving God, God of right doing and freedom, we pray for our country that its divisions and inequities may be thoughtfully and peacefully addressed by our leaders, for our world and its violence and destruction, that we who have much may remember our connection to those who have little.

Healer of every ill and wound, we pray for those whose greatest enemy may be their own frail body or troubled mind. Comfort those who mourn with the promise that when our walk on earth has ended, you are waiting to welcome us with open arms into your loving heart. As Jesus taught us, so we pray, *Our Father and Mother in heaven....*