

St James United Church

Message for January 8, 2023

Epiphany Sunday (Last Sunday of Christmas)



“In Humble Homage” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 2:1-12; Gregory Boyle, *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness* (NY: Avid Reader Press, 2021), 128, 137, 140

I'm glad our Christmas decorations are still up in the church. The tradition of them having to be taken down in our homes before the end of Old Christmas, which is also Epiphany, always makes me feel like we don't give Epiphany its celebratory due. I'm not surprised, of course. Each season we put all our focus on Luke's version of Jesus' birth and treat Matthew's as an add on. Our nativity scenes even place magi beside shepherds at the manger. It wasn't always this way. Before the 300s, this was the big day. And why not? Luke's tale of a baby in a manger, of angels and shepherds is moving, but Matthew's has a two year trek by magi from another land who saw a star and on finding the child fall to their knees. What an image! Astrologers, priests of a royal court, humbled before a toddler from an unimportant village far from the centre of power in Rome! There is so much to consider in this story that, like Luke's, tells us who Jesus is and invites us to ponder who we are.

What I notice is a contrast not just in the recipients of the birth announcement but how it's made. In Luke's story, lowly shepherds receive an angelic chorus. It's a powerful image which underscores Mary's song of how God will lift up the lowly. But it also reinforces how we think God is supposed to show up – in glory. Matthew flips this. Those who honour him are high-born, albeit Gentiles, but Jesus' birth is revealed by a star most people don't notice. Now that's not the way it's shown in art. We imagine a supernova, a comet, an alignment of planets. But if that was the case why did no one else see it? Why did Herod need to be told where to find Jesus? The star was insignificant, only noticeable by those who spent their lives reading them, in a part of the sky associated with a kingdom no one cared about nor expected anything important to come from.

That's a big point of the narrative. It's important that magi humbled themselves, but the one they honoured did so first. This is the biblical pattern - God acts first, then we respond. Like in Isaiah 60 as light comes, removing the cloud and relationships are restored. But when God acts it isn't about control or power. Paul names this in Philippians: Christ didn't cling to divinity but emptied themselves, humbling themselves in every way to be human, even to the point of accepting death on a cross. This is God's way, constantly letting go for life to be born. It is captured in poem I love, Malcolm Guite's "Descent": "They sought to soar into the skies / Those classic gods of high renown / For lofty pride aspires to rise / But you came down. / You dropped down from the mountains sheer / Forsook the eagle for the dove. / The other gods demanded fear / But you gave love." God lets everything go, gives all in love. And still the way we tell the story is focused on angels in the sky, or we turn a feeble star into a bright comet.

Why wouldn't we? Just watch TV. Our politics, economics, entertainment, all follow the pattern of the classic gods, all focus on growing, having more, being bigger, rising over others. We can't live this way, of course, not if we want an equitable society, a sustainable economy, a thriving planet. So God comes to us each year, inviting us to kneel, to be smaller, to seek less, showing us that the way to fullness of life is not about being all-powerful, even though we image God that way, but being all-vulnerable, following a toddler God who let go of everything to be born, took on our weakness so we can be strong, so we can be restored in our identity as God's children.

This is an important lesson for us as church as well as a wider society. For a long time we were aligned with the powerful, were the powerful, but now fewer people are at worship, churches are closing, the Prime Minister doesn't ask the Moderator their opinion anymore. It feels like we are being pushed to the margins and it isn't where we like to be. Many of us grieve. Some push back. We see this in Christian nationalists on both sides of the border trying to put the church on top again. But I wonder if we're where we should be. Jesus was not on top, in the centre of the circle. That's where those who condemned him sat. Rather he was on the edge, not outside his community yet not in the thick of it either. It's a good spot. You see what's really going on from the edge, can imagine other ways of doing things. And from there you can reach out to those pushed out by the people at the centre, or were never even in the circle. When Jesus did that it was like a light had come, a cloud lifted, and relationships were restored. As Fr. Boyle reminds us, we're called to do that again, no longer acting like those who judged Jesus, deciding for God what counts as sin, and so hurting many people - women, Indigenous peoples, those of us who identify as sexual or gender minorities, people from non-Christian faiths – but in love treating everyone as kin. When we do we take to heart how God revealed Jesus' birth to those from another faith, from a foreign land.

Given this, I see our position on the edge as an opportunity to imagine new ways of doing things, including as a congregation. It's humbling to be smaller than before, but it means we need to pay attention to our neighbours, many of them recent immigrants or international students, to reach out rather than wait for people to come to us. And because we use less space now, we can partner with groups who need some. One group is the Islamic Circle of North America who run a drop in out of the manse. We have also been in conversation with Quadrangle, a support agency for the LGBTQ+ community. These are great opportunities, but we need a posture of humility for these relationships to be life-giving for everyone, and so to be open to other ways of seeing the world, be it another culture, or faith, or no faith, recognizing that many of us who identify as LGBTQ+ have been hurt by churches and so feel a bit cautious. Our task is to listen, to seek understanding, to be vulnerable, always open to what another person wants to share. When we do a cloud may lift and relationships be restored.

This to me is the gift of Epiphany. It invites us to humble ourselves like the magi, to do so because that is God's way, vulnerable rather than powerful, letting go in love. I pray we take it to heart. When we do, we'll truly mark Epiphany, not just today but long after we've put the decorations away. Amen.