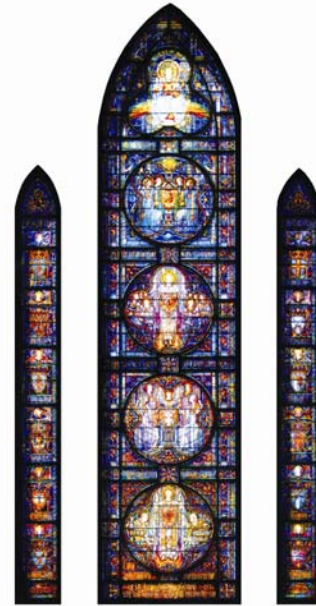


January 9, 2011

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sermons



Star Rising

by The Reverend Laurie Brubaker Davis

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-23

This past Thursday, January 6, 2011, was the day we Christians observed “Epiphany.” What did you do last Thursday? At some point in the day did you break into song with a stirring rendition of “O Holy Night” and then at just the right moment, did you “fall on your knees?” I didn’t. Chances are, you went about your regular Thursday business, perhaps noticing that strange, churchy word “Epiphany” marked on most calendars. But what is Epiphany exactly? It is one of those words we’re supposed to know, but can never quite remember what it means.

I will remind you. There are actually two kinds of epiphanies: The big “E” Epiphany and the little “e” epiphanies. The big “E” Epiphany commemorates the coming of the Magi or Wise Men, Gentile astrologers from the East, with three gifts, to recognize the appearance of God in the birth of the child named Jesus. We Gentiles especially take heart from this story that expands the scope of the Messiah’s reign and mission, from day one, to include not only Jews, but all people: Jews and non-Jews, or Gentiles. We observe this holy day, once a year, 12 days after Christmas,

on January 6. That's the big "E" story of Epiphany. A little "e" epiphany happens, not just once a year, but any time, any moment, when all of a sudden you recognize the presence of Christ; when the divine light shines right in your face or into your heart, often giving you a new insight or deep assurance. That is an "epiphany."

I happen to love the timing and the meaning of the big "E" Epiphany because it pushes us to keep looking for the Christ Child well into the New Year, after the flurry of ribbons and bags and boxes, the wrappings and trappings of the Christmas holiday are over. Let's think for a moment: Where did you find Christ this Christmas? Was there a moment or a circumstance where you had an epiphany, a sudden flash or a flicker of a thought? Did you think, "Could *this* be God?" Perhaps someone said something to you, offered a small gesture, or an unexpected alignment of the stars in your life? Whether you were blessed with a little "e" epiphany recently or not, I hope you are still looking—still seeking—still searching. 'Tis the season of Epiphany all the way until Ash Wednesday, March 9, this year. And since you are here today, I'm thinking you still are looking, seeking and searching.

"Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage." Did you know that these were the first words spoken by any person in Matthew's Gospel? These are the words the Wise Men spoke to anyone in Jerusalem who would listen. Being Gentiles and astrologers, they knew their stars, but not the Hebrew scriptures. This Gospel, written primarily as a confessional document for insiders, starts with a question posed by curious outsiders—way-outsiders—both geographically and theologically. They may have been Zoroastrians, or even experts in the occult arts. Yet, we can learn from their question, because it is the question God wants *us* to ask. It is the question that can drive us again and again, deeper and deeper into the heart of God—our God who wants to be found—our God who wants to be found so profoundly, that our God, the Creator of the entire universe, chose to disclose in the form of a baby named Jesus.

God made this move well over 2,000 years before the "Decade of Disclosure" we all just completed on December 31, 2010. That's what Jack Haberer, author and editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, suggested as a label to describe the social trend of our first decade in the new millennium. He writes, "If the 1970's were the 'Me Generation' years and the 80's were called 'The Decade of Greed,' and the 90's the 'Decade of the dot.coms,' what about the 00s – what BBC dubbed the

'noughties'?" He suggests the label, the "Decade of Disclosure."

Why? This was the decade that brought Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and instant messaging. Jack Haberer continues, "Whereas a few writers through the years have been so prolific as to have earned the remark, '... never had an unpublished thought,' in the noughties, millions of us never had an unpublished thought. This social trend has started to redefine how we relate to each other." *Time Magazine's* "Person of the Year" choice of Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, would concur with Jack Haberer's label. "Facebook (with its 500 million members in 297 countries), Twitter, and IMing all provide vehicles for reporting to friends what one had for breakfast, and last night's bout with intestinal flu—linked to video on YouTube. As Napster founder Shawn Fanning muses in *The Social Network*, 'We lived on farms. Then we lived in cities. Now we're going to live on the Internet.'" (*Presbyterian Outlook* Jan 10, 2011 p. 5)

Jack reflects, "In our Internet residences we've traded pretense and hypocrisy for authenticity, transparency, and disclosure." I think he might be a bit optimistic in his assessment of Internet life styles. We're all pretty good at spouting pretense and hypocrisy wherever we choose to hang our virtual hat—but I do believe those who are living more and more on the Internet, the children of the "Decade of Disclosure" are *seeking candor*, wherever it can be found. They too, like those crazy astrologists on their quest, are asking us, children of the prior decades: "**Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews?**" Where *is* the Star Rising? Where *is* the Light of Dawn's Redeeming Grace to be found?

The longer I live and ponder this question in my own crazy ups and downs, the more I'm coming to realize something. As much as I'd like to think that "one fine day" things will go according to my plan, I will know exactly what the day holds for me, and be completely ready. That day will never come. Nor is this the goal God has for me. I'm slowly coming to discover, whether I like it or not, Christ is most present in the search itself, in the seeking, in the looking up and following the star, in the humble awareness that, yes, God is always trying to grow me, every day I am given to live on this earth. Even while I'm stumbling around, making false starts, and wrong turns, if I stay open, God will use them to grow my spirit. Those very moments we might otherwise disregard can become moments of divine disclosure: epiphanies.

When do these moments arrive? We can take instruction and inspiration from those

wacky astrologers who not only looked up and noticed this strange star, but dropped everything to follow it as it rose. Not “later” when it became convenient, not “later” after they had thoroughly mapped out the journey and had all their ducks (camels?) in a row. They took off once they saw his star rising. They began their search not really knowing where they were going or just what sort of king they were looking for.

Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose. Have you seen his star rise? When and where does his star rise now? Today, we have an advantage over the Wise Men. We have the life and teachings of Jesus to point the way.

Our Bible tells us that Jesus’ star rises wherever and whenever we become people who refuse to play the game of “in groups” and “out groups” and determine to be, whatever the cost, a “come-on-in group,” whether in your school’s lunchroom, in your office break room, or in our own Fellowship Hall downstairs during coffee hour. Wherever “outsiders” and “insiders” cross these invisible boundaries, and seek their common ground, in spite of apparent and appalling differences, Christ is there. Epiphanies will occur.

Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews? Just as the baby Jesus and his family became refugees in Egypt, Jesus is still to be found with refugees all over the world. Most recently, we know there are thousands fleeing to Liberia from the Ivory Coast, fearing the outbreak of civil war and now in Brisbane, Australia where flood waters are washing away entire neighborhoods. In these two countries and everywhere families are forced to flee from their homes, Christ is there. At the same time, Christ is also to be found comforting all the “Rachels” who are weeping over their children killed before their time, whether from famine, disease, or violently slain, caught in the crossfire of gang wars, terrorist attacks, or any kind of war.

Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews? On New Year’s Day, I believe Jesus was there at Enon Beach Recreation Park in Mad River Township to catch in his arms, this time not a child, but a mother and wife: Clark County Deputy Sheriff Suzanne Hopper. Jesus was there at the moment she was fatally shot down while investigating a call about shots fired at the Park. We cannot make sense out of this tragic, violent event. It is beyond our comprehension. Yet we do know that God chose to enter this crazy, violent world of ours, as a vulnerable

baby, who had to be shuttled in the night from one place to another to avoid being killed. Yes, we worship a God who chose to become a human, experienced a human birth, and who bled and died a violent death, overcome by the forces of politics and power, which are in play as much today as they were 2,000 years ago.

As surely as the sun rises, we have been given a Savior whom God raised from the dead. This Star with scars on his hands and feet, ultimately rising, always rising—promises to be with us, even and especially through our nights of darkness—our long hours of pain, suffering, and loss.

Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews? We also find Christ wherever and whenever the common good of all people and our earth is sought diligently. Like the Magi, seeking diligently the child whose Star had risen, our Epiphany season of seeking the Lord's presence, challenges us to examine our role as citizens, as well.

On the first week our new Congress set to work, eager to make progress on our economy, on the war in Afghanistan, and the project of increasing global security. Then yesterday, we suffered a stunning, heartbreaking setback. Saturday's shooting near a grocery store in Tuscon, Arizona of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, and others, including the fatal shooting of Federal Judge John Roll, slaps us in the face and kicks us in the gut as a nation. It tells us, once again, how hatred and vitriolic anger can lead to violence—and not just in the days of King Herod, nor just in lands far away from here. This national tragedy calls us to fall to our knees in prayer and to rise up and take stock. As Clarence Dupnik, the Pima County sheriff remarked at an evening news conference, "It's time for the country to do a little soul-searching."

What can we do to help our elected leaders to seek the common good of all people and our earth? I think these words of Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourner* magazine and author, point us in the right direction: "Neither the Left nor the Right has the answers, so we have to focus on the spiritual and moral values that bring us together, to choose the common good over private gain, inclusiveness over intolerance, civility over shouting, morality over expediency, stewardship over consumption, truth over spin, and right over wrong."

Especially this morning, after yesterday's tragedy, we are searching and asking, **"Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews?"**

Like the Magi, we know we have found the Child when we follow a different way home—different than the world’s way, when our love rises above conventional levels. That’s right Jesus is found when we get beyond the “love our friends and hate our enemies” way of navigating through our days. Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, and showed us how. Loving enemies doesn’t make sense to us. But it does to God. Jesus is found when we realize that the same evils are at work in “us” are also at work in “them”: the dark drives of greed, hate, fear, and ignorance. Looking for the light of God in every person seems impossible to us—but not to God. Again, I emphasize, it’s the looking for, the seeking, the searching, to which God calls us.

It’s a good thing that God never gives up on us, and our violent ways. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his 1967 speech, “Where Do We Go from Here?” spoke words still timely here today, in 2011:

Through violence you may murder a murderer, but you can’t murder, murder.

Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can’t establish truth.

Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can’t murder hate.

Darkness cannot put out darkness.

Only light can do that.

That is why God chose to disclose and become one of us who was and is the Light of the World. That is why we are here—seeking, searching for the light of Christ, whose power met violence with love and ultimately overcame it.

I will close my sermon with a prayer I found one day back when I was a college student in the 70s. (Yes, I came of age in the “me-generation.”) I had a small “e” epiphany one day in the library at the College of Wooster when I discovered the writings and prayers of Thomas Merton. They have helped shape my faith and my life ever since. This is one of his prayers. Let us pray:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

(From *Thoughts in Solitude* by Thomas Merton)