

This Sunday is Epiphany. I love Christmas, and I also love Epiphany. Next Sunday we'll have the Baptism of Jesus, and we'll remain in the season of Epiphany through the month of February. Epiphany means appearance or manifestation.

For me Epiphany is also about surprise... those aha moments, when an insight changes everything about how you see or understand. It's like putting together a puzzle, all those little pieces, and suddenly a bigger picture emerges, there is clarity, and you see something you weren't expecting...

The big epiphany for all Christians is Emmanuel, God is with us... In and through the birth of Jesus, at great cost, God shows up... God is present with us, and shows us how much He loves us!

In the gospel of Luke, the child is revealed to the shepherds, in Matthew the child is revealed through the wise men.

They see the star rising, and they go to Jerusalem to pay homage to the new King of the Jews. And since Herod is the King, it only makes sense to start with him... The scholars are consulted, the new king would be in Bethlehem, the wise men leave and follow the star. When the star stopped, they entered the house, they were overwhelmed with joy and offered the gold, frankincense and myrrh.

They are traditional gifts given to a new king. And they are symbolic, gold is a symbol of value and kingship, frankincense is an incense and a symbol of deity, and myrrh is an oil, embalming oil specifically and a symbol of death. Kings were often regarded as Gods, and in the business of making life and death decisions.

In the ancient world, gifts were rarely given. And if they were, they had strings attached. Usually the result of wanting something in return, like quid pro quo, I give you this and you give me that.

That these wise men gave gifts and didn't expect anything in return, is a miracle itself and sign of the kingdom of God. The mountains are brought low and the valleys are filled...

The wise men were warned in a dream to keep the child concealed from Herod. Joseph and Mary are also warned in a dream and take Jesus to safety in Egypt. Later in the story, Herod will take the tragic step of killing off all the potential rivals, killing all the children under three in Bethlehem, known as the killing of the innocents... So, in the gospel of Matthew, even at the birth, violence is in the background. King Herod is already shaking in his boots.

Today I'd like to reflect on epiphany itself, what is the experience, and how do we witness it in our lives. And then talk more specifically on the epiphany that Jesus is Lord; that God came to dwell with us in the birth and person of Jesus. So, first of all, what is the experience of epiphany?

A quick story... I love playing guitar I've played since I was a kid. When I was in high school, I played with many different groups, my favorite was a band called "Stage Fright." And believe me, we were a fright! We played for high school dances and things like that; it was a lot of fun.

After getting married, starting a career and having a family, my guitar sat in the closet a lot. Once in a while, I'd get it out and play whatever songs I could remember. I did learn a few kid songs. I've never been a good guitarist; it's just something I enjoy.

When the kids got older, I started playing more earnestly again. Brad Deitner and I started to play guitar together and now we play with a little neighborhood jam band.

Some of the music we play is country. And I'll be honest, that's a whole different style of playing. I had a hard time trying to figuring out those guitar licks. I just couldn't figure out what they were doing; and for years... I just couldn't get it! I kept wondering, how do they do that?

About twelve years ago I saw a YouTube video, a young kid was talking about something he called chicken pickin; he said that to play country music you needed to learn how to do chicken pickin.

He held up his hand holding a pick, with his other fingers up, he said “looks like a chicken head, you have to use your pick and your fingers together.” And it was like a light bulb went on; I thought I can do that. I’ve used a flat pick for a zillion years, I’ve also been a finger picker for a zillion years, and all I need to do is use both at the same time! Huh, who’d a thunk!

That little insight launched me into a whole new way of thinking about and playing guitar. It was as if, I had played guitar for forty some years, even taught lessons, but with one little insight, a whole new world opened up. I had an epiphany, and that brought change.

Isn’t that amazing? We can be doing the same thing over and over and for years and years, thinking we know just about everything there is to know; when suddenly our eyes are opened, and we see things we never expected to see.

For me, the church season of Epiphany is about the continuous revealing of who Jesus is. And just when we think we’ve got it all figured out, surprise something new comes along we never anticipated. And faith takes on a new understanding, a deeper dimension, and a greater appreciation for the mystery of faith. And it’s always fresh! We will never exhaust our experiences of Jesus.

An interesting thing about an epiphany is that it usually happens in the context of struggling with something; perhaps a question, like, “how do they do that? And often times it involves an experience, and the question we might be struggling with is, “What does this mean”?

All of us, we are constantly interpreting our experiences and wondering, “what does this mean.”

Another story... When I was doing my Chaplaincy training, I was asked to visit a patient who was struggling with her recent diagnosis. So, I entered the room and introduced myself as the chaplain. She immediately said she didn’t believe in God and so I didn’t need to waste my time.

I said, I'm not here to talk about God, I'm just wondering what this diagnosis means for you? A little gruffly at first, she said, "I'll tell what it means."

And suddenly we were in this big conversation about her kids and her job and her friends... She was scared to death, and had no idea how things were going to turn out. And my heart was broken... She was struggling. She was in a world of hurt. and she needed to talk. And I just listened...

When I needed to get going, she was happy I had come, we were friends, we bonded... I'm sure I didn't do anything different than her nurses had already done. I didn't offer to say any prayers, and she didn't ask for any. I was just there for her, like any other friend. And she appreciated that...

I don't know if she had any big epiphanies, and maybe she did and I'll never know... But I had an epiphany, we are all called to be God's presence to one another, to those we pray with, and to those who can't pray with us. And what started out as a road block on her end, was no barrier what so ever. That surprised me...

Epiphanies keep coming to us, they open our eyes, we see things differently, transformation happens. That's how epiphanies work-- epiphanies are little miracles in themselves.

The Christian journey is full of epiphanies; sometimes large, sometimes small; we experience them in and through preaching, baptism and communion; through service to our neighbors, through confession and forgiveness; in reconciliation, hope, and love; and certainly through resurrection... Surprises upon surprises... new ways of looking and seeing... Faith is an amazing miracle...

The good news this morning is that the God we worship is a God who comes to us in the form of a human baby. A God who loves us so much he came to be present with us.

And through Jesus' teaching we come to experience a God who uses judgment to love; a God who looks at sin and sees forgiveness; a God who looks at death and sees resurrection; A God

who looks at brokenness and sees reconciliation; A God who looks at suffering and holds our hand; even when we don't know it...

Faith is often in the journey and the struggle, in the questions and surprises...

Like those wise men on a journey, following the star; when it stopped, they were overwhelmed with Joy, their hearts were opened, they knelt at the baby Jesus and shared from their hearts. And surprise, they gave without expecting anything in return...

Faith is as much about the journey as it is about the destination.

What Epiphanies have you experienced lately? And like those wise men, seek and you shall find...

Amen...