

In the name of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit, Amen.

The English word Epiphany is derived from the Greek meaning to manifest or show. Today we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany, a day for us to embark upon a journey of discovery, inviting the Holy Spirit to reveal to us ultimate truth. The Holy Spirit given to the church on Pentecost and poured out upon us in baptism seeks to multiply and expand our faith in unpredictable and exciting ways. The unpredictability of the Spirit runs contrary to our desire for a fixed schedule and control.

Human kind it seems would rather preoccupy itself with linear explanations that describe a progression to a higher order, from the least to the most. One example is how anthropologists plot human evolution. The categories from most primitive to most advanced are: Australopithecus, Homoerectus, Neanderthal man, Cro-Magnon man and Modern man. The good news is that according to the experts we are in the last category (at least the majority of us) and are the most advanced. The bad news is that according to the experts we are still evolving and have not yet arrived. Can our species find fulfillment if it believes it is not the end all? Well at the rate that Modern Man treats other modern men and women and the modern world we might just prove the biological anthropologists wrong and may actually end it all and therefore be the end all.

Technology was also said to progress in a linear fashion from the Stone Age into the Bronze Age and then into the Iron Age. In every age however it seems that as our technology improves our uses for that technology does not seem to evolve. In the Stone Age our ancestors made stone arrowheads and spearheads to use as weapons in their fighting and killing of each other. In the Bronze Age, swords, sabers and daggers were crafted for the same purpose. In the Iron Age and up until today, in this age of technology and information, on the street our children are equipped with assault weapons and on T.V. we watch smart bombs efficiently annihilate enemies from a safe distance. As we watch our kindred in Gaza and Israel, children of Abraham that call on Our God in worship killing each other, just 45 miles away from Bethlehem, we question what kind of progress we have been making!

Developmentally, the German Psychologist Erick Erickson described the lifecycle as a linear journey and in each stage there is said to be an overarching tension that must be dealt with and conquered. The infant battles with trust. The baby will trust if regularly comforted when distressed. The toddler starts to exercise autonomy, yet confronts shame in the process. The Preschooler battles with initiative verses guilt; the School-age child deals with issues of self worth as it relates to productivity. The Adolescent struggles with identity and trying to integrate the many roles in life into one. The Young Adult deals with commitment and changing social boundaries. The Middle Age Adult looks for fulfillment in work and family and social ties and fights against complacency. Finally according to Erickson, the older adult finds comfort in life's accomplishments, but wrestles with despair in dealing with loss and preparing for death. I don't think too many of us want to run to the end of Erickson's line. I think that we would prefer to be on the journey.

After Erickson's theory, if you need a little something to get you motivated perhaps taking a journey up Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid will lift your spirits. While the shape is that of a pyramid, the concept is still basically linear. According to Maslow there are predetermined needs that need to be fulfilled in order for a person to progress to the next level. The first category at the bottom of the pyramid consists of Deficiency needs which are Physiological (food, water, clothing, shelter, sleep, etc.) The second is safety and security (of employment and family). Third is love and belonging (friendship, family and intimacy). The fourth is esteem (self esteem, confidence, respect). The fifth stage is self-actualization (morality, creativity, openness to truth, problem solving orientation).

Near the end of his life Maslow believed that his five stages didn't cut it and that there had to be something more, a sixth stage. This strata above self actualization which he dubbed Self-transcendence. It included an ultimate awareness of the realm of being, and was marked by a vision or "epiphany".

Our linear journey through this sermon has brought us back to the beginning of our discussion. Epiphanies are not scheduled, yet they are often predicted by God's Spirit filled prophets.

The magi, wisemen/ magicians from the East were believed to be from Persia, modern day Iran. Can you imagine a caravan of Iranians bearing gifts being welcomed into Jerusalem today? That would be an epiphany! From Persia to Jerusalem was a journey of between 1000 and 1200 miles. That distance would have taken anywhere from a couple of months to a year to complete and before commencing on such a journey adequate time must have been spent in preparation. Allow your mind to expand the vision of the magi and their journey. What amazing light did they witness in the sky that caused them to take such an intense road trip?? Could you imagine taking off from your planned life for even a day or two, let alone months! And why did they go? They went to "pay homage" or "worship" literally, "bend the knee" before this king who's star shone in the sky. I know that many of you have traveled 20 minutes to get here to bend the knee before God this morning, but add another ten or twenty weeks to that commute and I think attendance would drop off. Especially if the Bills were playing!

So today we remember the Epiphany of that star that shone brightly in the sky and led to magi to the house where the Holy Family resided (Notice there is no mention of a stable). Like the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the desert to the promise land, this light led these children of God to the promised child. Light and life were intersecting and it was God's doing! (+)

We remember the magi, the magician/ wise gentiles of the East. We pause at this second epiphany, as we are surprised that persons outside of Israel accept this revelation even though Her prophets predicted the messiah's birth. Still even more astounding is that when the chief priests and scribes are asked where the child is to be born and reveal this information, they don't jump on a camel and ride along with the magi. It must not have been the kind of messiah that they were looking for. What kind of messiah are we

looking for? For those led by the Spirit the routine of life is shattered and Grace is beheld.

In the days when the prophet and author of Isaiah 60 spoke, the prediction was that God's people would rise again after being reduced to ruins. Christians read this passage through the lense of the advent of Christ and see Jesus' birth as ushering in this truth. The gold and frankincense mentioned by Isaiah was in two of those chests that the magicians from the East were carrying. But there was the third gift, the resin called myrrh that is not called for in this prophecy. It is the unexpected and scandalous part of the story. It pushes us outside of our comfort zone because it messes up the happily ever after and predictable scenario. Luther states that Matthew makes mention of Herod the King to remind us of Jacob's prophecy in Genesis 49[10]: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs." Luther points out that Herod was a foreign king appointed by Rome and therefore since the scepter or throne departed from Judah, God himself came in the form of Jesus to take to throne. The Gold and Frankincense were fit for a king But the Myrrh that the magi bring indicates that this king would indeed be different.

Myrrh is a fragrant resin, but instead of shrinking and liquefying it blooms or expands. It is the only resin that does this. It is added to wine, oil and is a fragrant perfume that was used to cover the smell of cremation ceremonies by the Romans. (If I close my eyes and take a minuet and remember the days following September 11th, I remember clearly the noxious perfume that was poured all over ground zero and which permeated the city's downtown. For the people of Jesus' day the smell of Myrrh being burned would be like that perfume smell...) It was widely used in burial preparations for the same reason. It was mixed with wine and refused by Christ at the cross, and in John's gospel we read that it was used to prepare Jesus' body after his death. Could even the predictable smell of death and decay be overcome?

The true Epiphany is that God sent his son, Jesus to be a servant king. All of Creation would attest to this truth, even the stars in the sky. This king would not only be the messiah for the people of Israel, but for every man woman and child that has ever lived, is living and will live. This King would know our human condition, understand that our horizontal line of existence would have to be intersected with a vertical line connecting creature with creator once and for all. (+) The Cross! This is the place where God wrestles us sinners from our arrested development and our linear dead ends and lifts us up to God's own nourishing breast! The epiphany is found in the offering of the Myrrh, which gives way to the sweet smell of the Easter Lilly.

On this feast of the Epiphany, we remember that the story continues. Herod sends troops into Bethlehem to kill the innocent children. We remember that Joseph warned by a dream, heads to Egypt and most likely journeys on the ancient trade route, which would take them through modern day Gaza. We pause and remember that Christ came for the Israelite as well as the Palestinian, for the Christian, Jew and Muslim- for you and for me, to set us all free! (Free to bend the knee, free to offer up one's life with the assurance that God will transform our broken gifts and bodies into something sweet, something

The Feast of The Epiphany
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pure, and something unpredictably wonderful for us to share with the rest of the children of God.) We pray for our brothers and sisters and ask for an Epiphany of peace for them as well as for us.

Life is indeed a journey, not linear, but circular. We begin and end our journey in God with the Spirit as our guide. Amen.