

Epiphany Sunday

“Don’t Be Like the Magi”

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

First I want to say what an honor it is to be speaking in front of you all today. For some years now Epiphany Sunday has been a special celebration at Campbell United Methodist Church. Just looking around at the pageantry and beautiful outfits you can see that this tradition continues and it indicates the strength and diversity of our church community. It is a great privilege to speak to you today.

As Chair of the Church Council, I would like to thank you for your participation and involvement in Campbell UMC. Churches today are feeling the pressures of competing with modern lifestyles and the demand for your time and your thoughts. So this time of year is a good place to start aligning your priorities for the year ahead. Pastor Oak Yuen and the Church Council are working to continue the works and programs that help so many people but the Finance Committee is struggling to close a \$20,000 gap on this year’s budget. So we will need you continued generosity to keep these programs going.

Epiphany is celebrated twelve days after Christmas on January 6th. So this year Epiphany falls on a Sunday. It is generally the time when Christians remember the Magi, the wise men who visited Jesus. Epiphany is also when some Churches remember when Jesus was baptized, and also the Wedding at Cana where Jesus performed his first miracle by turning water into wine. All these were significant events that revealed Jesus as divine. And that is what an Epiphany is....a revelation.

I look forward to speaking to you this morning about my interpretations of the story of the Magi that I thought I knew very well until I started researching for this morning. A word of caution though... I am by no means a trained biblical scholar so I would be happy to hear your thoughts on my views in future conversations.. bearing in mind my informal education.

Just to revise Pastor Ouk-Yean’s sermon series on John Wesley I have applied the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to better interpret today’s reading. First, Scripture is the primary source and standard. Second, tradition. We view the readings through the development and growth of our faith through the past and from many nations and cultures. Third, Reason. It is not reasonable that we should take literally some of the verses in the Bible, such as rulings on slavery, or ancient food preparation. Fourth, Experience. Experience is the individual's understanding of faith based on his or her own life.

We heard in today’s reading, the Magi, also known as the Wise Men, also described as the Three Kings, visiting the baby Jesus. This story is one of the oldest in Christianity. We all know the story of the Three Wise Men, following the star to visit the baby Jesus at the stable. But where does *that* image come from? The passage that was just read doesn’t mention *three* men (it does mention they brought three gifts, either.) and the passage does **not** describe a farm scene as described In the book of Luke. In fact, it says, “When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming **to the house**, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.”

The house?? Not a stable, no farm animals, shepherds or little drummer boys? It seems as though the Books of Matthew and Luke have been intertwined to give us the popular version we see in Christmas cards and on TV.

The Magi left some nice gifts with appropriate symbolism for the divine child – gold for wealth, myrrh, a plant resin used as an antiseptic, for health and the perfume frankincense, representing purity and nobility.

It is also worth noting that the Magi were not locals. “Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.” They were foreigners to Israel, yet they were some of the first people who God chose to reveal his Son on earth. The next part blows me away and here’s why I recommend not being totally like the wise men. After they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts they were “warned in a dream not to go back to Herod.... they returned to their country by another route.” The End! No more Magi..No more mention of wise men anywhere else in the Bible! What! After traveling all that way, following a star to the place where Jesus was, presenting him with gold, frankincense and myrrh. After all, they declared - ” We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

Lovely that they did that...**but that’s it?** They got all excited about their journey to Christmas, followed the star on faith, gave praise and worship, exchanged gifts and then left. Never to be heard of again. Now that’s starting to sound like a more like a familiar story in 21st century Silicon Valley. All too often many of us are like the wise men. We have an injection of Christian enthusiasm in the Advent season, we come to church for Christmas service, offer our gifts but then return to the same habits and places we started with. Why is that? Professional coaches would say that “for something to become important and to be done well that something has to become a habit.”

The New Year is a time of resolutions. And isn’t the New Year the best time to start a new habit. You probably have a list of them ready go. But if you do not yet have a resolution here’s one I hope you can consider. Become a regular visitor to Jesus. It’s fun to celebrate the birth of Christ with family and friends but birthdays only happen once a year and you shouldn’t celebrate your family just once a year. Make a very small commitment to being more involved in your Christianity, make a little extra effort to be at church on Sunday, make good decisions. Try and love your neighbor. Become more involved in this church. Start a new habit by waking up each morning with a resolution to love your neighbor. The first thing when you open your eyes, say a pray like “I will try to love my neighbors”. And before you go to sleep, look back on the day and say, “Did I love my neighbor?”

I attended a presentation at Sacramento Convention Center once and the keynote speaker’s phone alarm went off in the middle of his presentation in front of 500 people. He grabbed his phone and explained that at a precise time everyday he takes time out to spend one minute (60 seconds) to reflect on what he is thankful for. And now was that precise time. This simple process required no gym membership, no counting calories, no life improvement courses...a simple alert to take a break and think about what really matters...but he does it every day so it has become a habit. He unapologetically invited all 500 people present to join him in a moment of reflection. You may want to pick a more suitable time for a minute of reflection – in the car on your way to work, for example, or preparing a meal. Just do it every day until it becomes a habit.

As United Methodists we should be very good at these practices. The very name of our denomination was giving to the founders who had a “method” to enact their principles with dedication and devotion.

Speaking of Silicon Valley, Netflix - the media entertainment company just down the road here near Winchester and Hwy 85, has developed a new technology for watching TV. You start at the beginning of the movie but, as with all stories, at some point the character has to make a decision, do I join the war or do I run away, do I fall in love or do I run away, do I go left or right, will I wear the brown shoes or the black? You get the picture.

But with Netflix technology you get to make the decision for the character. The movie gives you ten seconds to take your remote, select the decision and allow the movie to continue along the path selected. The latest Netflix movie has 19 possible endings! So you could watch the same movie 19 times and it would be different. Some decisions do not affect the plot too much but others have major consequences.

I like to use this process to speculate and make Bible readings a bit more interesting. If I could watch the Epiphany story using this technology and change the ending. Freeze frame : Please use your remote to make a selection: The Magi A) returned to their country by another route; or B) stayed with Jesus and his family and continued to worship him.

Maybe this would have been a better decision for the Magi. In fact, in the remaining chapter of Matthew King Herod is so upset and jealous that the Magi did not return to tell him where the King of the Jews was located, that he has every boy under 2 years old executed.

Joseph takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape the slaughter. Interestingly, Jesus, Mary and Joseph live in a strange land as immigrants until their return to Nazareth after the death of King Herod.

What if I used Netflix technology to give this story an alternative ending? Joseph had a dream and took Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape the violence: A) They safely entered Egypt and lived there; or B) They were detained at the border. Jesus was separated from his parents, and after some time, the entire family was sent back to face their persecutors.

We live in a world of choices. Hundreds a day. Most are inconsequential but some have a significant impact on our future lives and those around us. Do we really need to blow our horn at inconsiderate drivers? Can I afford to give more to the church? Should I sleep in on a rainy Sunday or go to church? Do I have time to join a church group?

Most of our decisions we make out of habit or necessity. We have to eat but we skip breakfast out of habit. Epiphany is a time of revelation. Let us be the wise ones. Let’s make this Epiphany a time to reveal a new commitment to God and to develop a small habit to remind us daily to make good decisions based on our faith in the Kingdom of God and the love of Jesus Christ.

Amen.