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“Celebrating Epiphany”
John 1: 1-9

I did something monumental this week – I took out my old calendar and put a fresh, brand-spanking-new one into my day planner. I know I’m a bit old-school carrying around a calendar and not using my mobile phone for that... but that’s another sermon. I think changing calendars is a sacramental activity. It’s like putting the past and all of its ups and downs behind us and starting with a clean slate. It felt good to get rid of that raggedy old thing.

It’s been said that every day is holy – a gift of time in which we enter into a rhythm of God’s creation. When I open a new calendar, those blank pages feel a lot more holy than the ones in the old, worn calendar – days already gone. A new calendar sort of brings a fresh awareness that the future is open to whatever God and I design together. Days on a new calendar are not yet profaned by so much hurry, rush, and/or sloth.

It’s like the New Year brings a sense of hope for a new future, this one brighter than the ones before. Today is Epiphany Day, the 12th Day after Christmas if you count from sundown to sundown. We’re extra fortunate because Epiphany isn’t usually on a Sunday. So I decided we should have a little fun today celebrating the epiphanies of our lives.

The word “epiphany” means to “show” or to “make known” or even “to reveal”. I like the more descriptive definition “an illuminating discovery”. A simple star in the sky showed the magi where to find the Christ. It was an epiphany for them. Epiphany is actually supposed to be the climax of the Advent and Christmas season and is a time for feasting!

Epiphany is, along with Christmas & Easter, one of the three oldest festival days of the Christian Church. It is first mentioned in 361 CE by Ammianus Marcellinus (XXI ii) ancienthistory.com/Epiphany

In ancient times, the priest announced the date of Easter during the feast of Epiphany. This tradition dates back to a time when calendars were not readily available, and the church needed to publicize the date of Easter. (Evidently, there have been Easter & Christmas attendance Christians for a long time!)

Wikipedia.com/epiphany

Epiphany is symbolized by light and stars and the liturgical colors for the season are white and gold – colors of celebration, newness, and hope. That is why our text for today is one about Jesus being the “Life-Light”. *The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one. Everything was created through him; nothing - not one thing! - came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out. There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light. The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into Light.* **John 1:1-9**

Epiphany is the season when we remember the Wise Men or star seekers bringing gifts to the child Jesus. The significance for this is often overlooked or misunderstood. The season is about us – all who would seek light and life – in Christ. Epiphany has theological significance and is a teaching time in the church. Because the magi were the first to “show” or “reveal” Jesus, and because they were Gentiles, this was the first indication that outsiders would be included in the work of God in the world.

Dennis Bratcher, www.crivoice.org

And it has caught on all over the world! In Hispanic and Latin cultures, as well as some places in Europe, Epiphany is known as Three Kings Day. A ring-shaped Epiphany cake is eaten and the one who finds a bean, or a coin or a plastic baby inside is named “king” for a day. It is the beginning of Carnival, which is a time to feast and celebrate with abandon until Ash Wednesday! We’re going to have a King’s Cake today during our Fellowship time after church. Kathryn Langrehr and I have made the cakes and in each one is a shiny penny. It is large enough that you will find it and not swallow accidentally. Whoever finds the pennies is king or queen for the day!

In the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany, children in groups of three go in costume from house to house while singing songs and they receive a coin or something sweet at each home, or they may choose to solicit donations for a worthy cause.

In Finland, spice cookies are made and cut into the shape of a star. The cookies are broken in the palm of one’s hand, while making a silent wish. If the cookie breaks into three pieces, and all three are eaten without saying a word, it is said that the wish will come true.

In Colorado, Epiphany is marked by the Great Fruitcake Toss. Fruitcakes are thrown, participants dress as kings, fools and competitions are held for the farthest throw, the most creative projectile device, etc.! In Virginia, Epiphany is a date used to have a ball, a dance, or even a wedding. In Atlanta, a wooden cross is thrown into a bayou and teen boys dive in to retrieve it (remember, it is January). Whoever recovers the cross is blessed for a full year.

When I planned my ordination (20 years ago this month), I scheduled it during Epiphany. Why? Because it is a season symbolized by seeking people and their questions.

- Epiphany is the season when all of us who aren’t quite sure the church is for us find our way to worship the Christ anyway.

- Epiphany is the season when those who are looking for meaning in the night sky and in dreams can find what we seek.
- Epiphany is the season when the church is called to reach out to people who have been shut out by the world.
- Epiphany is the season when we begin anew – with a clean slate, a blank calendar – to live out our hopes and dreams where anything is possible.

It seems to me that we hear the world's bad news continually. We hear about wars, terrorists, car bombing, special precautions to keep safe, hurricanes, racial discord, school shoots, and even horrendous family problems that end in violence in the one place we want to be the safest.

Epiphany is the time of stark contrast to that chaos and pain. Jesus was born in a time of great upheaval and uncertainty. Yet, the light of the star symbolizes God calling to us to a new place where we can experience light and hope. Epiphany is a time for us to be reminded that God continues to do new things in our world. Emmanuel – God with us – has come and we are invited to join the star seekers. Presumably, the star was visible to hundreds-even thousands of people. Only a handful chose to believe and followed it to find God's word of hope.

I've shared with you several of Ann Weems poems during Advent. This final one is entitled "It Is Not Over".

It is not over,
 this birthing.
 There are always newer skies
 into which
 God can throw stars.
 When we begin to think
 that we can predict the Advent of God,
 that we can box the Christ
 in a stable in Bethlehem,
 that's just the time

that God will be born
in a place we can't imagine and won't believe.
Those who wait for God
watch with their hearts and not their eyes,
Listening
always listening
for God's new words.

As Epiphany people, we believe that God's grace often arrives right in the middle of our mess. Signs of hope and wonder surround us if we but look.