

Some of you already know this about me, but I can be a bit of a liturgical nerd. I’m not necessarily talking about the “high church” smells-and-bells, although I have found the fullness of the liturgy to be meaningful in certain settings and situations. No, I’m talking more about the liturgical *calendar*—the festivals and the seasons, the occasions and observances that provide the rhythm for our worship life over the course of a year—or the course of several years. The flow of the church year, it seems to me, matches certain aspects of our life together—with the advent focus on light coming during the shortest days of the year, and the Easter promise of new life arriving just as we begin to see glimpses of spring, at least here in the Northern Hemisphere. I love that in any given church year we get almost equal parts of focus on the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus on the one hand and the life and growth of the church on the other. And there are always surprises built into the liturgical year, both in terms of things we’ve never noticed before or the spirit speaking to us in all new ways. Surprises like Christmas Eve and Christmas Day being followed immediately by the commemoration of St. Steven, the observance of the Holy Innocents and the feast of St. John, along with some of the so-called lesser festivals like the Name of Jesus. Like I said, I’m a liturgical nerd.

Which is why I mind myself a little bit conflicted about the way we have tended to play around with the church calendar at this time of year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany.

Technically, we’re still in the season of Christmas—today is the *tenth* day of Christmas, so that means there’s still two days left after today. Epiphany doesn’t actually arrive until Wednesday. But the texts normally assigned for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Christmas are ones we

already have read on both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. And since we don't have a midweek service for Epiphany, by next Sunday, we're on to something else—the baptism of Jesus, an important text to reflect on as well. Now, I'm not throwing any of my worship planning colleagues under the bus here, as I was definitely in on this planning. And maybe it's not that important how we arrived here, but I wanted to share with you some of the inner struggle about today being our *transferred* observance of the festival of Epiphany.

Still, here we are: Epiphany. Today and in the five Sundays following we celebrate Christ's great Epiphany, the in-breaking of God's light into our world, along with several other epiphanies, the continually unfolding revelation of the human-born Jesus as the Word-made-flesh, as God-with-us. Our readings help us understand that God's incarnation is for all people everywhere. This is a message of inclusively, of radical welcome, of the widening of the circle of the people of God. It begins with the magi—who we intermittently refer to as the Wise, Oriental, or even Kings—these scholars drawn from far away to come to pay homage to the Christ child. They who were once far off are now embraced by the one true God, who has sent a Savior into the world—for the whole world. Including us.

And as you may have read in the Herald or seen on the screens in worship these past couple of weeks “What” is our theme for this Epiphany season. Now, some of you may be imagining a sort of riff on the old Abbot and Costello “Who's on First” routine, and believe me, it's easy enough to imagine. You should have heard us in that first worship planning session; it got a little bit silly. Still, this somewhat odd theme comes from the idea that we needed to spend some time extending the message of God-with-us that is so clearly part of the Christmas season to the days and weeks that follow. To move beyond simply observing

or even celebrating the fact that God has come to earth in human form in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, to reflecting on what that means for us today—and what that meaning might be calling us to be and to do as disciples of that Christ child all these years later. So, as a way to unpack this important “What”, we decided that during this season on Epiphany, we’re going to make use of a playful adaptation of what’s known as the Experiential Learning Cycle: a process gets to the heart of a situation by asking these three simple questions:

What?            So What?            and            Now What?

In our case, the answers to these questions begin to move us from the event of Christmas in and of itself, to its larger meaning for us as those who would follow Jesus. This is the epiphany, the revelation, the manifestation we seek: to re-discover, or maybe discover for the first time, what Christ’s coming into our world—into our neighborhood, even—can mean for us individually, as a congregation, and as the body of Christ known as the Church.

Here’s how Epiphany fits into this framework we’ve adopted and adapted for our theme:

WHAT            God’s Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.

SO WHAT        This is good news for every place and time—including here and now.

NOW WHAT     We, like the Magi, have gifts to offer for God’s glory and to Christ’s purpose.

WHAT            The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. This is the heart of the meaning of the epiphany—the revelation that in Jesus, God has become one of us. Call it the miracle of Christmas, call it the scandal of the incarnation, but the **truth** that as Christians we believe and remember and celebrate and continue to be challenged by is that in Jesus Christ God became a real-live human being. That he grew up with human

parents, that he felt the human emotions of joy and sadness and anger and fear and disgust. Depending on how you translate the opening of the Gospel of John, we know that Jesus, the Word made flesh “dwelt among us,” or “pitched his tent with ours,” or “moved into the neighborhood.” His living among us is, among other things, a huge tangible sign of God’s never-ending movement toward us. This movement of God toward us didn’t start in the Incarnation of Jesus as the Word made flesh, nor did it end there once and for all. But it was in many ways THE chief telltale sign of that movement, and the single biggest reminder that in Jesus God is for us, God is with us, and God is forever moving towards us.

SO WHAT     This is good news for every place and time—including here and now. One of the meanings behind the “big reveal” of Epiphany is that Jesus Christ is not just the Messiah long-awaited by God’s chosen people of ancient Israel. The a-ha moment of the Epiphany is that Christ has come as the messiah, the anointed one for ALL people, from ALL nations and cultures, of ALL times and places. This begins with the Magi—who are said to be foreign sages, seers and prophets from far, far away. With the visit of the Magi, the prophecy of Isaiah is simultaneously fulfilled and inverted. As Isaiah says, all nations do come and gather to worship the one true God; but in doing so, it is also revealed to them that God has come to live among humanity. And not just one portion of humanity, but all of humanity.

The wise men realize this long before King Herod’s so-called prophets and sages figure it out. And as they are warned in a dream and go home by another way, they do so with this news to share. And in a movement that prefigures the later spreading of the good news of Jesus from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, these wise ones return to their distant lands, having experienced the truth that God has now come in the form of a human baby.

So ... what else? So, it is revealed to them what we need to be reminded of as well, thousands of years later. That with the birth of Jesus—God has come to live not just in our human world, not just in our global neighborhood, but in each and every one of our individual neighborhoods. That there is no place on earth where God is not present, no where that needs them or us to “bring” God’s presence, but rather there is a new invitation for us, like them, to have one epiphany after another, as we see Christ revealed everywhere that we go, as well as places we can only dream of going. God is already there. God is with us and with all humanity.

NOW WHAT We, like the Magi, have gifts to offer for God’s glory and to Christ’s purpose. In the “now what” portion of the experiential learning cycle, there are usually action steps to be taken. We see the What—that the Word has been made flesh and lives among us. We find the deeper meaning in the “so what,” that this is good news for all people everywhere, and then we are moved to action in the “now what,” that we, too, have gifts to bring and, quite frankly, work to do. If we accept that in Jesus God has moved into our neighborhood, then that means the God is actively on a mission in the whole world, including the world right around us. Part of the action that we are called to in response to this is quite simply to become seekers like the Magi before us. Or as one more recent sage has put it, maybe me and you can be wise guys too.

Our mission is to wisely seek out lots of little epiphanies all around us—lots of ways and places and situations where God is already active in our neighborhood, in our community, in our world. Like the wise men, we can follow the signs God put out there ahead of us, sometimes with little or nothing to go on, but having the faith that God is leading us and

will reveal God's self and God's activity to us. And then, also like the Magi, we have our own gifts to offer. Gifts that are large and small, gifts that obvious and more subtle, gifts that we have that we can in turn put to use in furthering God's mission in the world. Part of our "now what," part of the continuing epiphany that we seek is all of the many ways God will reveal to us not only where God is active "out there" in the world, but how we can be of service to God's mission.

This is our epiphany—our revelation, our eye-opening surprise. In the Christ-child, born in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago, God's light has broken into our world. Our reality is that God's light continues to break into our world, our neighborhood, our families, our lives. And in this inclusive reality, everyone is welcome, and so are their gifts. Just as the magi showed their respect for Christ with gold, frankincense, and myrrh, we can offer our gifts and talents to further the brightness of God's dawn in our lives, among our friends and family, in our neighborhoods, our country, our world. Whatever we bring—no matter how simple—is accepted and used for a mighty purpose.

Sisters and brothers, as we turn this corner from Christmas into Epiphany, we ask again:

**What**—what child is this? This, this is Christ, the King.

**So what?** So bring him incense, gold and myrrh, or whatever gift, large or small that you may have to offer to Christ, for Christ's mission, to Christ's glory.

**Now what?**