

Follow the Star

January 3, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 2:1-12

Today we are celebrating Epiphany Sunday. And if I were to be honest, this Sunday in the church always feels to me just a teensy little bit out of step with the rest of the world. Actually, everything about Advent and Christmas and Epiphany is a little bit out-of-sync with the world.

We start hearing Christmas carols blasting in grocery stores – if we're lucky, the day after Thanksgiving – and it feels like everything around us transforms in an instant into Christmas, whether we are ready for it or not. I've mentioned before that this transformation seemed to happen even earlier this year, as it seemed like all of us rushed as soon as Halloween was over to light up some of the darkness around us and bring on the joy of Christmas – the joy that we so desperately needed to usher us through the end of 2020 – a year that will certainly go down in infamy.

But in the church, Christmas doesn't *start* until *Christmas*. I threw more Christmas carols into our hymns earlier this year than most years – because *I* needed it too. Let's just get to that baby in the manger already because this Advent season of watching and waiting and hoping for a light in the darkness – this Advent season has pretty much lasted since Lent. So let's bring on Christmas. But officially, Christmas doesn't happen until *Christmas*.

And then we have the *season* of Christmas, which officially begins on Christmas day and does not end until January 6 – the day of Epiphany. This season of 12 days is where the song the 12 Days of Christmas comes from. So when the trees and all the decorations have come down and we're totally sick of Christmas songs because we've been hearing them for over a month, that is when the Christmas season is officially and technically in full-swing.

And then that brings us to Epiphany. The kids are getting ready to go back to school. Work has resumed. And we've probably broken more than a few of our New Year's resolutions.

And then we tune in to church and hear the story of the wise men.

The wise men got packed up with the nativity scene two weeks ago. And yet, here we are.

So today we celebrate Epiphany Sunday – the Sunday closest to January 6 – the first day of *not* Christmas. The first Sunday of what we call "ordinary time" – that time when we are not in the middle of a season of celebration like Christmas or Easter, and we're not

in the middle of a season of preparation and reflection like Advent or Lent...ordinary time is basically “life as usual.” “Back to the grind.” “Normal, everyday happenings.” Living into the “ordinary” of life.

Most years, when I talk about ordinary time, it is with a certain level of **sigh**. Alright, the holiday fun is over; the magic of Christmas is behind us, now, back to real life again. But this year, when I think about ordinary, it is with a little bit of nostalgia, a sense of longing. How much are we all searching this year for just a little bit of ordinary? A teensy bit of normal? All of a sudden, this year, “ordinary” sounds like a vacation. We are chomping at the bit for ordinary. For expected. For predictable. Unfortunately, when it comes to COVID, we are going to have to wait a little bit longer for “ordinary” to return. But when it comes to the Christmas story, and the story that follows, ordinary is here, and still speaking into our lives, still breathing the simple yet powerful moments of Jesus’s life into our collective soul. Still opening us up to be met by God incarnate. So when life is a bit catty-whompus, the familiar gospel story gives us that solid foundation that we so desperately need right now.

So to kick off “ordinary time,” we begin with an extraordinary story. A story that sounds like it belongs in the Christmas story – and so we’ve made it part of the Christmas story, which is why it always feels weird to be reading it once Christmas is over. A story of wise men from the East following a star – a star that takes them through Jerusalem, that sets off King Herod in a panic. A star that takes these men to Bethlehem where they meet young Jesus with Mary and Joseph, and they bow down and worship him, and offer him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

And we call this story “epiphany” – a word meaning a couple of different things:

- First, an appearance or manifestation of a god or other supernatural being.
- And second, a moment of sudden insight or understanding.

What I find really interesting about Epiphany – the appearance of a god; a moment of sudden understanding – is that it doesn’t happen on Christmas – on the day when God actually appeared. But at some undetermined time later. It could have been a day or two after Jesus’ birth that the wise men made it to where Jesus was, or even up to two years later. We really don’t know how much time had passed.

What we do know is that life was starting to return to normal. The shepherds had gone back into their fields again. Room had opened up in the Inn, and the wise men visited Jesus not in a stable, but in a house. Life was moving on and Mary and Joseph were figuring out what “normal” was now that they had a little one to care for. Herod worries about the time that has elapsed since the star first appeared in the sky, and later orders the execution of not just newborn babies, but toddlers as well. Time is passing.

And yet, while the world is going back to normal again, we have these wise men catching a glimpse of something strange about the night sky. In the hum-drum of life, there’s something unusual happening in the middle of the ordinary that so far nobody

but the shepherds has taken notice of – and for the shepherds, they only noticed because an angel appeared directly to them in the fields.

Yet the wise men see this star that has appeared in the sky, for them signaling the birth of a king. So as tradition would have it, they followed the star so that they could pay their respects. The star took them through Jerusalem and so naturally they would have assumed, “Hey, a new baby in King Herod’s line must have been born. We should go congratulate the king.”

But as they quickly discovered, nobody in Herod’s family had had a baby. And their appearance in Herod’s house raised some big red flags for Herod. Like, prompted total panic and a murderous streak.

And so the wise men set off once more, thoroughly confused. Looking for a king. But not looking for a successor to Herod’s throne. Looking for a ruler. But a ruler of which the current ruler had had no knowledge. Hidden away in tiny little Bethlehem of Judea. A town in the middle of nowhere.

And then, just like that, the star stopped, over a house in Bethlehem.

And right then, the wise men had this moment. I imagine that it was probably only just the briefest of all moments, tucked away in verse 11 – this moment nestled deep within huge life happenings. It was a moment in which kings weren’t panicking and sending them on a mission to hand a baby over to be killed; a moment in which they weren’t following a star blindly to an unknown location searching for an unknown child of an unknown age. It was a moment in which they weren’t astrologers meeting an infant messiah or staring face-to-face with God incarnate. For this little, brief moment there was a hush that came over their souls and as they prepared to step into the home where Mary and Joseph and Jesus were staying, and something washed over them. Their fear over what had taken place in Jerusalem and their uncertainty over what they would find when they walked into that house all just melted away. And they were “overwhelmed with joy.”

I think *this* was the moment of Epiphany. The epiphany wasn’t their decision to follow a star into the vast unknown. It wasn’t the extravagant gifts that they brought, fit for royalty. It was what happened in this ordinary moment – this quiet moment between the big events – this fleeting moment of “ordinary time” when the star stopped moving and the wise men found themselves “overwhelmed with joy.” *This* was when their moment of sudden understanding came. When they knew, for the first time, that God was here. With them. Now.

And so they did the only thing they could do when met by the presence of God: in this fleeting moment between the big events, they rejoiced.

My friends, what does “ordinary time” look like for you, in your life? *Especially* this year? In the days when you are not in the middle of a celebration, and not frantically trying to mitigate a crisis; those moments, days, seasons that are nestled in between the big high points and the big low points of life? Nestled so deeply, perhaps, that it feels like they almost pass unnoticed?

I know that for me, I get into a routine. These are the times I work; these are the times I spend time with my family. During such-and-such a time the kids are in school, and at such-and-such a time the kids watch TV while I try my best to make it look like the house isn't ground zero of the apocalypse. On these days I go grocery shopping. On these days from this time to this time I respond to emails and phone calls, and from this window to this window I think ahead toward things coming up that need some extra preparation, from this time to this time I work on a sermon, and from this time to this time I am working on editing and uploading videos. And one week blends into the next, which blends into the next, which blends into the next. There is an “ordinary” rhythm, even in the midst of the insanity of this season of life.

For a lot of you, the little bits of “special” from one week to the next have basically disappeared, at least for the time being – this lunch gathering or that study or this social event or that outing – and *everything* about life has become ordinary. Moving from one day into the next, into the next. Marked maybe by a doctor's appointment or a trip to the grocery store, but otherwise unremarkable. Boring, even. Some of you are feeling “ordinaried out.” Feeling like you need a star to follow or a baby to visit, just to break up the monotony. For a lot of you, ordinary doesn't feel like a gift. It's become dull. Lifeless.

And others are just longing for some sense of “ordinary.” Those of you who are trying to work – maybe from home, and so you don't get that physical break – those physical boundaries between work life and home life. And maybe you have kids that are doing school virtually and so you are trying to be both work-at-home parent and homeschool parent, both at the same time, which is basically impossible. And it's winter, so opportunities to send the kids outside to run off some energy are few and far between, and so the noises of stir-crazy little people all up in each other's space are inescapable. And every day is something new, something overwhelming, another curveball to adjust to, another catastrophe to manage. For some of you, “ordinary” is like a pipe dream, and when it does show up it is in things like doing dishes and laundry and pumping gas and taking a trip through the cereal aisle.

But how would life be different if we looked at these moments of ordinary-ness – whether they be brief, fleeting moments or long, drawn-out seasons – as opportunities to be overwhelmed by joy? Because that's what they are. There are times that they might feel dull, or drab, or lifeless, or unremarkable, but they are also the areas where life quiets down enough that we have space to breathe, to reflect, to feel the presence of God washing over us, to notice and take delight in the little gifts of the moment. The gift of a star stopping over an ordinary home instead of a castle. The gift of a temporary lull in the journey. The gift of a cup of coffee or a sip of tea. The gift of a quiet moment

in a busy day. The gift of a simple smile or a kind word. The gift of a beautiful sunset. The gift of a fleeting moment of inspiration. The gift of a heart-felt conversation. The gift of a nourishing meal.

So today, may you be startled by an epiphany. May you be overwhelmed by joy when you least expect it. May you find rest in the chaos and delight in the mundane. And may you come face-to-face with the God who restores us this day.