

Truth, Empire, and the Long Road Home

By: Meagan McLaughlin

January 10, 2021. Pastor Meagan's sermon today is on the feast of Epiphany, and what it means for us in these days of racism and violence.

Reading: [Matthew 2:1-17](#)

*** Transcript ***

Today, we are celebrating the feast of the Epiphany. We are celebrating Christ with us and God leading us. I was finishing my sermon on Wednesday afternoon, January 6, when Pastor Kendra came across the hall from her office and told me to turn on the news. I watched with a mix of shock and horror as thousands of armed white people climbed walls, broke windows, and entered and interrupted congressional session in what was by clear definition an attempted coup. I have been sickened as I have heard the pain of colleagues and friends of color who know just how differently this would have turned out if the coup had been led by people of color.

And so, the sermon I had written has changed, as our worship has changed, in light of what has unfolded in front of us the last few days. Epiphany tells us a story about the three kings, following the star, traveling from far parts of the earth to see what God is up to. They make a pit stop at the palace of King Herod when the star disappears, before continuing on their journey. It's a familiar story, showing us that even the kings come before Jesus to bring gifts from all corners of the earth, so that they can worship God, Emmanuel. And this is certainly an important message of this story. But what I have realized in this time more than ever is that Epiphany is teaching us about truth, and empire, and the persistence and faithfulness of God's surprising guidance and work in this world.

Epiphany literally means, in one definition, a sudden revelation or insight, an awareness of a truth that wasn't apparent before. I think about when I realized that I was not, and never would be, perfect, a revelation that left me at once horrified and giddy with relief. Or that moment when I saw my parents as actual human beings for the first time. (Yes kids, this may happen to you too.) I think about those major national events of my lifetime that have changed forever how I see the world, like the explosion of the Challenger, the attempted assassination of President Reagan, the attack on the World Trade Center, and of course the events of January 6, 2021.

Epiphany is about truth revealed, and that is not always a comfortable or welcome thing. Because often the truth God shows us challenges us to see things differently, to acknowledge issues and problems and barriers within ourselves, to change our minds on things we thought we were certain of. And often, the truths God reveals are a threat to the empire, the powers and privileges that shape our world, in some ways making us feel safe. The three kings brought news to Herod of what they saw God doing — bringing a new king into the world — that threatened everything he had. And look at what Herod did — when the wise people, who he tried to make allies to his empire, failed to return to tell him where he could find Jesus, he sent his soldiers to kill all the babies, to try to prevent this “new king” from taking his power. We don't really know how many children were slaughtered on Herod's orders, and he may in fact have done many worse things, but it was certainly among the worst things we can imagine empire doing.

And in our country, these last months, we have empire threatened now, willing to use any means to hold onto the little power they have left — even if, we realize especially after this week, it means

figuratively speaking burning everything.

The good news is, Herod, the empire of Jesus's time, didn't succeed. And neither, Christ Lutheran family, will the empire of today. The journey will not be easy, far from it, and we are a long ways from the end of it. But still, God is here, among us. The good news of God in Jesus Christ is that God's work in this world cannot be subverted, or prevented, or even delayed. Empire notwithstanding, God continues to guide us in the most surprising of ways.

As the three wise people, these three kings, arrived in Bethlehem, they had been on the road for months, perhaps even years, as they studied the skies, following a strange convergence of stars or planets that seemed to indicate something amazing was on the horizon. They weren't sure what would come of it all, but they did believe that whatever they found when they got there, it would be worth their trouble. We don't know where they came from, except from "the East."

We do know, from Matthew's telling, that they travelled together at least part of the journey, and they all ended up in the same place: a stable, not in Herod's throne room, not in Jerusalem or any of the other large imperial cities, but in Bethlehem of all places, where a baby had been born to a poor couple who were far from home. And as surprising as the scene might have been for its seeming insignificance, the wise people somehow knew that they were exactly where they were supposed to be.

There was no way to tell what would happen from there, and the journey was not over for these kings who had already traveled so far, but they had seen what they knew to be truth. Matthew tells us they resisted Herod, the empire, and continued on a different path. And God continued to lead them.

We are in our own time in a moment of Epiphany. On our TV screens and laptops and newspapers on January 6th, we saw clearly the truth of the damage caused by the sins of racism, violence, individualism, and lies. We saw unfolding in real time what the empire of our day is willing to do to hold onto power. And in the days since, we have seen hope, as conflicts have been resolved (at least for now) and the immediate questions that led to Wednesday's events have been answered. But Christ Lutheran family, just as the three kings continued their journey long after they left Bethlehem, our journey continues also.

Colleagues from across the country who gathered for a January 7th Zoom meeting exhorted us to recognize that part of the challenge for us as people of faith is to see the brokenness in ourselves, as well as in the world. We as Lutherans know we are sinner and saint, and we have all benefited from, and contributed to, the broken systems of racism, poverty, oppression, and division that have led us to this moment in our history. The full truth that is being revealed in our Epiphany must be heard and embraced, before healing can begin.

We as people of faith know that God is present and at work. God is even now guiding us to leave behind the empire of our day, to renounce systems and powers warped by racism and greed and untruth, and follow where God is leading us by another path, guided by truth, justice, grace, and love, as frightening or unfamiliar or surprising as it might be.

We have been on a journey of our own this last year, haven't we? We were just beginning to get to know each other when the pandemic came and so much of what we had planned, and what was familiar to us, was necessarily changed. In our own lives and homes, we have made countless decisions about how to keep ourselves and our families safe, navigated new ways of working and studying in person or online, watched and prayed for family members who were ill, cancelled and changed plans for holidays

and vacations, said goodbye to loved ones who died, and welcomed new life. We have grieved countless losses and celebrated joys of all sizes. We have been tired, lonely, anxious, giddy, grateful, and so many other things. So much has happened, and we have traveled so far in the year that seemed to go on forever.

And God has been with us through it all. Guiding us, as the star guided the three kings. Giving us hope. Bringing us together, as our Isaiah reading says, from all corners of the world, even if it is over Zoom. God has shown us that new life comes out of death in Christ's resurrection, even in a pandemic. That we can share the abundance of God's table in communion, each from our own homes. That prayer can cross oceans in ways that seem tangible. That simple things like a bag of groceries, Advent gifts, Christmas lights, sidewalk chalk messages, phone calls and emails and notes, can mean more than we ever knew before.

So in the midst of the sometimes frightening and ugly truths we are faced with, we know we can trust that God is with us now. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow penned the words to "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," which we will sing in a minute, in the midst of the Civil War when his son had just died, offering profound witness to this truth. The journey of the wise men, the revelation they experienced, their courage in defying Herod, and God's faithfulness in guiding them through the unknown teaches us this. God is here, showing us truths we need to see, leading us away from brokenness and death, and guiding us on a new way home.

Where have you seen the star, this last year? What truths have you learned, about yourself and the world? What signs have you seen of God's transforming, creative, life-giving, abundant love, in this community, your families, our world? And where is God leading you, and us of Christ Lutheran, next?

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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