

Ekklesia

January 18, 2018



David Gilbert captured the beginning of snowfall in Sunbright this week.

Sunday Worship

The liberal-conservative battle so familiar to our daily lives in the world of politics and religion was going on in the ministry of Jesus. It emerges as Law vs. Gospel in the Epistles of Paul and eventually took institutional forms in churches and denominations in Christian history. Jesus embraced the role of liberator (liberal), in his inaugural address in Nazareth (Luke 4:16ff). Jesus also embraced the Jewish religion and its rich history preserved in the Torah and Prophets. In Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5:17) Jesus denied that he came to abolish the law and prophets: "I have come not to abolish but to fulfil." But, without question Jesus was viewed as a radical. Accused by "conservators of the past" of rejecting history and tradition, he injected new meaning to an old faith. The Roman government tolerated religions with a deep history and connection to a subject nation, but upstart new religious movements were viewed as disruptive and revolutionary. Although the Gospels clearly state that Jesus had no political ambitions and absolutely no military objectives, he was apparently accused by Jewish leaders and crucified by Roman authority as a radical revolutionary. Viewed as a radical who not only accepted but created the turbulence of a changing new world, the Gospels presented Jesus as the Christ of a changing world order, the kingdom of God.

The second chapter of Mark is introductory, a series of staccato events, statements, and metaphors that summarize the controversial ministry of Jesus. Mark presents three disconnected examples of controversial breaks with tradition: Jesus associated with sinners and tax collectors, his disciples did not fast like the disciples of John, and his disciples violated the Pharisees' understanding of Sabbath law. I would venture the guess that Jesus would be no less disruptive and controversial in our world as he was in the Roman world of the first century.

Join us for worship Sunday as we weigh the significance of history and the movement toward the future hope in the calling of Jesus toward the kingdom of God. The gospel of Christ sets the stage and defines for us "breaking news."

—Larry. Text: Mark 2:18-28

Prayer Concerns

Available to members.

Memorial Service for Jim Ellis

The memorial service for Jim Ellis will be at the church at 2:00 p.m. next Friday, January 26. Visitation will be at 1:30 and a reception will follow the service. If you would like to help provide food for the reception, you may contact Susan Parrish.

Wednesday Meal: Prepared

Thanks to this week's snow, our meal next Wednesday will be what we had anticipated this week: ham & bean soup, vegetable beef soup, corn bread, slaw and dessert left over from last week's Table of Grace. You will not need to sign up to attend.

Needed: Plastic Bags

At each month's Table of Grace we send our guests home with a bag of items for future meals. Recently, we have started receiving bread from Panera's. (Thank you, Panera's). This means we need the regular sized grocery bags, plus some larger bags for people to carry out the bread. If you have any to contribute to our cause, please drop them by fellowship hall.

PFLAG

PFLAG of Oak Ridge will gather for pizza and a movie in the Fellowship Hall of First United Methodist Church on Monday, January 22 at 5:45 p.m. Please come to the lower back Vienna Road entrance. The movie, "Milk," will begin at 6:00 p.m. and last 2 hours. All are welcome.

Centering Prayer Group

The Centering Prayer Group gathers in the chapel every Sunday morning from 9:45 to 10:30 a.m. Newcomers are welcome.

Calendar

Weekly GCC Calendar

Sun: 9:45a—Centering Prayer (Resuming 9/10)

10:30a—Fellowship

11:00a—Worship

1:30p—LUAPA

Wed: 5:00 p.m.—Thoughts and Prayers

5:45 p.m.—Dinner

7:00 p.m.—Grace Chorale

Sundays *Iglesia Apostolica worship service (1:30 p.m.)* Thursday evenings/Saturday—*Iglesia Apolsolica service & music practice*

January 26 [Memorial Service for Jim Ellis](#)

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Epiphany's Promise

sermon digest

January 14, 2018

Matthew 2:1-12

carolyn dipboye

Perhaps you didn't notice it, since our service last Sunday focused on the Grace Chorale's presentation of Christmas/Advent music; but last week we turned a significant corner in the church year. We turned into the season of Epiphany, the season of the Christian year, which begins after the twelfth day of Christmas and extends to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Today, we pick up on Epiphany's themes. In doing so, we are not turning away from Christmas, but turning to what Christmas means in the world in which we live. Christmas and the coming of the Christ into our world are not about some private little moment far removed from where we and the rest of the world live and breathe. It is about God's revelation in the midst of the world's hurts and struggles, enmities and frustrations. It is about the here and now. It is about the light that breaks upon us, but not *just* on us. It is about the world within us—yes. But it is also about the world around and beyond us. It is about the light illuminating everything on our landscapes and extending our landscapes beyond any we have ever known. It is about the light that illumines our hearts and minds; but it is also about our relationships, our community and the entire social order in which we live.

In keeping with the full expression of Epiphany, it is about a light that both calls and sends. Epiphany and, indeed, the whole of the Christian year are about what it means to live in the light of God's coming in Christ. It is about thanksgiving for the light that breaks into our lives and world; and it is about asking, "What shall we be and do in light of the enormity of this great gift?" It is, as the great Karl Barth once suggested, about holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. It is about the world in which we live and the faithfulness that calls us to live out the good news we have encountered right here in the middle of all that is unfinished and waiting to be done. Epiphany is about the hope and promise of God-with-us here and now. Epiphany is about our calling to live out of that hope and promise in the priorities and decisions of our lives.

Epiphany bids us into the wider world, and it begins in the most Jewish book of the Gospels. The Feast of the Epiphany, observed on January 6, dates back at least to the 4th century and is older than the celebration of Christmas. Different geographical regions of the church today focus on different aspects of the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ. In the Eastern church, the nativity itself, the baptism of Jesus and Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine are central. Each of these events, some of the early church fathers taught, happened on the same day of the year. The Western church focuses on the visitation of the magi to view the infant Jesus, purportedly 12 days after his birth.

Although in the typical modern Christmas creche, Matthew's and Luke's differing versions of the Christmas story tend to get blended together, depicting the shepherds and magi arriving at the manger simultaneously, Luke's story with the shepherds and Matthew's with the magi are different. We do not have conflicting histories here in which we need to separate fact from fiction. They are not histories so much as stories with a message beneath the surface. The appropriate question is not, what happened? The best question we can ask is, what is the message?

Only Matthew tells of foreign guests, not only from another geographical region like Persia but probably from a non-Jewish religion. Matthew's Jewish Gospel affirms a revelation of God to "foreigners" with unfamiliar religious beliefs and practices. It is significant that the story of Gentile visitors to the birth of the Christ is found specifically in Matthew and only in Matthew, the most Jewish of the four Gospels. Matthew's vision extends beyond his own time and place. He looks back to long before the events recorded in the Gospels to a time in which the Hebrew Prophets envisioned a new world order where the hostility between Jews and Gentiles would come to an end. Matthew here is not abandoning his Jewish roots. He is *drawing* on them.

Matthew is also looking around and drawing upon the experience of the church of his own day. By the time Matthew is writing—45 or more years after Jesus' earthly ministry—Gentile believers were pouring into the church. The message of the gospel was not and could not be a provincial story about an isolated, privileged people. It had become a word of hope for all of God's children regardless of geographical origin, language, race, or religion. Thus, Matthew's very Jewish Gospel, so focused on Jesus' likeness to Moses and so given to citing fulfillment texts selected from the Hebrew Bible, moves to the crescendo of its final doxology: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." The larger world outside of biblical Palestine that intruded on Jewish life with foreign visitors at the birth of Jesus was the world into which Jesus sent his church. The message of the gospel had come full circle, reaching out to embrace the world.

Epiphany extends a call and a promise. The story of the magi and indeed the full story of Jesus uphold, in the words of Ken Sehested, "the scandalous notion that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not constrained by" human limitations on the reach of God's mercy. Put in contemporary terms, this means that our own "lists of who's been naughty, who's been nice," who is worthy and who is not, who stands outside of God's grace and who does not must all be put aside as irrelevant. "If we are faithful to this God, we must be prepared to also be shocked by those on whom God's spirit comes to rest. And maybe," Sehested suggests, "shocked to find out that the ordinary circumstances of our lives are the very places where the story of redemption breaks out" ["Epiphany: Learning to See What's Really Real, Prayer & Politics, Jan. 2018].

But can this really be true? Can the dividing walls, the fear and enmity of our own day be met and overcome in grace? I recently came across a current day Epiphany story. Naomi Shihab Nye relates a recent experience at the Albuquerque Airport Terminal. Shortly after learning of the 4-hour delay of her flight, she heard the announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Although a bit apprehensive—"one pauses these days," she admitted—she went to the desk, since it was her own gate. There she found an older woman in a full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, "just like my grandma wore." The woman was crumpled on the floor, wailing. "Talk to her," the flight agent pleaded. "We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

Naomi stooped to put her arm around the woman and began speaking haltingly in Arabic, asking about her concern. Relaxed at hearing her own language, the woman responded that she was on her way to critical medical treatment and understood that the flight had been cancelled. Reassuring her that the flight would indeed depart, Naomi offered to call her son and explain to him and to give her an opportunity to also talk with him. Completing the call and finding the woman at peace, Naomi then called the other sons and let the woman talk to them, and then she called her own father and allowed a hearty conversation in Arabic between the two of them.

The woman was so relieved, she reached in her bag and pulled out a bag of homemade Arabic cookies—the best cookies in the world—and offered them to her new best friend and to all the women at the gate. "To my amazement, not a single woman declined one," Naomi exclaims. "The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling." The airline then broke out free apple juice and two little girls from the flight ran around serving everyone. "It was like a sacrament. . . . I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too" [Gate A-4, in *Honeybee*].

I am not sure if Naomi, who is Arabic, is Muslim or Christian; but I do know that I identify with her sentiment. Walls breaking down at that airport gate and women reaching beyond the ever-present walls of suspicion and fear of those who are different to share that bit of cookie and drink speaks to me of a sacrament. Like the ancient magi, who were received at the bedside of the infant Christ and became "insiders" in the presence of God's gracious invitation, so may we, once alien to one another, once strangers to those who come among us as immigrants and refugees and people of other faiths, come to know and respect and treat one another as beloved children of God.

In these days, we are hearing far too much about walls being erected against those already in our midst, be they refugees from crises in El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti or Syria or merely people from another part of town who happen to have a different skin tone. Specifically in these days and in answer to the ever present and deeply hurtful sentiment of exclusion, may we realize we march to a

different gospel—a gospel of inclusion and compassion, a gospel that turns those who were once strangers into sisters and brothers with whom we break bread.

That, you see, is the promise of Epiphany. And that is our calling in Christ.

Ekklesia

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