

Seek, Walk, Kneel

January 7, 2024

Seek

One of the problems with having a long-term pastor is that it sometimes feels like you've heard all of her stories before. And you're right, if you've been around here much at all in the last decade, you've heard this one!

Sixteen years ago, on the Feast of the Epiphany, I knelt before God and the people of God in Plymouth United Church of Christ and vowed to be an agent of God through the teaching, preaching, and sacrament. It was a Saturday, which is uncommon – most of the ordinations we see these days in the UCC are held on Sunday afternoons. My colleagues packed up and drove across the region after coffee hour and forewent their well-deserved “preacher’s nap” in order to participate in the consecration of another life to this strange and wondrous calling. But I convinced the Church and Ministry Commission to schedule my ordination on Saturday, January 6 because it is the Feast of the Epiphany, and the last line of the Gospel that I just read is so symbolic in my ministry, “Because of what they learned in a dream, they went home a different way.”

Ministry and serving the God of Love is a homecoming for me. It's who I am. It's my DNA. When talking about my vocation, I often tell the story of teaching the other kindergarteners on my school bus the weekly Sunday School lesson once I figured out that they weren't churchgoers, and being very upset that I couldn't replicate the craft for them week by week. Serving God by putting myself in the service of fostering healing, justice, and grace, both personally and societally, has, indeed, been a homecoming.

But hear that verse again, “Because of what they learned in a dream, they went home a different way.” A substantial part of how I am able to be true to this calling is by learning and dreaming. By being willing to listen to how God is calling NOW, not just rigidly following what I have been taught in the past or even my strongly held beliefs.

And not only does being true to this calling rest on learning and dreaming, it also hinges on being willing to let those things that I learn and dream then reshape me. To go home a different way is a double entendre – to take a path you weren't expecting to take, and also to be a different person than you were before you set out on the journey, before the learning and the dreaming.

And so, it is in this spirit of learning and dreaming and going home a different way that I invite you into some of the lessons of Epiphany. First, the Magi are seekers. They're curious. They're not just navel-gazers, focused on their own existence. Rather, they're seeking meaning from the broader world, even if it means stretching them beyond what they already know and hold dear. They don't live lives of resignation or lamentation, but rather seek to learn from the world around them and allow wonder and fascination to lead them on a journey of discovery. As we celebrate Epiphany, I wonder how this model of learning and seeking and journeying and discovery might be part of our spiritual growth this year.

Last month, I wrote to the congregation after the controversy came to a head when the National Railroad Museum allowed a group called the Satanic Temple to have an entry in their festival of trees. In that message, I reminded the congregation that the scriptures are chock-full of examples of the “other” understanding God and God's ways better than the people of God do. Along with

the Good Samaritan who is the “other” and yet gets it, I cited the fact that Jonah is a prophet of God who doesn’t get it.

The Magi are also in this line, outsiders who, through seeking and learning and observing, come to a deep understanding of cosmic truth, despite being other. This depiction is deliberate on the part of the author of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is very intentional in wanting us to see that the insiders, the Jewish authorities, are in cahoots with the status quo, whereas the Magi, the mysterious outsiders, are agents of transformation and grace.

Thus, the first lesson I hear in the story of Epiphany this year is to keep our heads up, keep seeking and learning and growing and looking outside of our own headspace, allowing wonder and awe to illuminate our way.

“If we remain closed in the narrow confines of earthly things, if we waste away, heads bowed, hostages to our failures and our regrets; if we thirst for wealth and worldly comforts — which are here today and are gone tomorrow — rather than becoming seekers of life and love, our life slowly loses its light.”

—Pope Francis

Walk

The second lesson of Epiphany that I lift up today is that we need to walk. Now, as someone with chronic back and knee issues, I’m only being semi-literal here. Having recognized the rising of the star, the Magi set out on a journey. Their learning and seeking was tied to action. They put their feet into service of their contemplation.

So often, our spiritual lives are all in our heads. All too often, we pray about love and inclusion, justice and peace, and yet allow our feet to remain firmly planted under our kitchen tables or in our comfy slippers. The journey of the Magi reminds us that, once you’ve seen the star, you need to act on it. The Magi were able to find Love Incarnate not merely by basking in some religious theory, but by:

“setting out on a journey, seeking the signs of God’s presence in everyday life, and above all in encountering and touching the flesh of our brothers and sisters.”

—Pope Francis

This reminds us that the witness of Jesus isn’t merely something to warm our hearts on a cold winter’s night. Rather, seeking Jesus requires the wedding of contemplation and action, spirit and sign, love and justice, forgiveness and mercy.

Kneel

The last lesson of Epiphany that I’ll lift up today is that it also reminds us to kneel. Matthew 2 tells us that, when the Magi found Jesus, they knelt down and paid him homage.

When do people kneel?

- Prayer.
- To propose.
- Coronation.
- Ordination.

Kneeling is the utmost posture of reverence.

What do we kneel to?

- The sacred?
- In proposing and declaring one's utter devotion?
- In penitence, both personal and communal, as well as to plead our case?
- As beggars, groveling for change?

Kneeling, and particularly kneeling in homage, is an act of loyalty. The definition of homage is to submit oneself to another and put oneself in their service. Kneeling is sublimely humble and honorable. The only more reverent posture is prostration.

There is a hubris in standing that is wholly absent when kneeling. Remember the controversy back in 2017 when football players were kneeling to call attention to racial injustice? Those players were not flipping the bird, they were not turning their backs, they were not cavalierly chatting among themselves. They were engaging in what is one of the most sacred of actions. They were kneeling, the ultimate posture of humility.

When's the last time you tried to get off your knees? When I was younger it happened more easily, but now, it requires an aid – the back of a pew, an arm of support. As a 50-year-old mother of a three-year-old, I'll tell you, as you age, getting up off your knees isn't pretty. I wonder if this isn't a Godly design, to help us to remember that while the world may bring us to our knees, we are going to need help to get back up, to stand up? I wonder if there is something significant about the fact that for most of us, getting up off our knees requires help. The humility of kneeling and paying homage reminds us that putting ourselves into the service of grace is going to require us to link arms. We're going to need each other.

Conclusion

Friends, the Feast of the Epiphany holds a special place in my heart, and I hope it does in your hearts, too. As we pray with this familiar story, may it inspire us anew:

- To keep our heads up, seeking, learning, dreaming, and growing.
- May Epiphany serve as a reminder to keep our theories wedded to action, to PRAY and also DO.
- And may it draw us to our knees, that we might humble ourselves to be aligned with Christ and put into the service of God's ways of peace, joy, justice, and love.

God of healing and relationship, send an extra portion of your grace upon those who have the courage and humility to kneel down in service of your transforming love. Amen. May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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