

Jan. 5, 2020

Epiphany

Matthew 2: 1-12

Prayer: Dear Lord, this is the day we reflect on the star that led foreign magi to see the newborn Messiah. Let us turn toward the light, and then re-turn and re-turn. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

This Time, Next Year

Lillian Daniel is a Congregational pastor and writer, currently working in Iowa.

A new family came to her church, and their children participated in the Christmas pageant. When the next Christmas rolled around, the family's little boy went to his second pageant rehearsal ever.

When he saw what they were doing, he yelled, "Do you mean to tell me we are doing exactly the same story we did last year?"

Well, yeah. That's what we do.

That's why on Epiphany Sunday, we almost always use the Epiphany story of the wise men, their aha! moment of recognizing Jesus. The moment

when Jesus was *revealed* as the Messiah is part of our common Christian storehouse.

The moment we celebrate:

A star, a star,

shining in the night

that will bring us goodness and light.

Repetition is how we keep our stories alive, how we keep our traditions alive.

We have another tradition here at Triune. About this time each year, I preach a sermon called *This Time, Next Year*. The idea is that right now, you may be addicted. You may be unemployed .You may be homeless.

But in this new year, begin coming to the Round Table. Begin working with David or Kreg to get sober. Join our NA or AA meetings and get a sponsor. Begin working with Robin or Andrew to get housed. Begin working with Cheri to have a Circle team surround you.

And by this time next year, you might be surprised where you can be.

The parishioner I'm going to talk about today began abusing alcohol during college. So after one semester, his father refused to pay. He dropped out and enlisted in the Army.

“Little did I know,” he said, “that in the Army, you worked hard, played hard and drank hard.”

He served in Germany, Korea, and Fallujah, Iraq, before returning home to Fort Hood, Texas. He returned to school, earning an associate degree in computer science and working as a broke student in restaurants. But he was lucky. His boss introduced him to Alcoholics Anonymous and to culinary school.

For 20 years, he was sober, and enjoyed a career in restaurants, hotels, country clubs and university dining halls. He married and had a daughter. He moved to Greenville to oversee dining services first for an assisted living facility, then a hospital in Anderson. He was making \$70,000 a year and bought a three-bedroom house in Greer.

Then he got sick with an autoimmune disease that he likely contracted in Iraq. He was also exposed to high levels of gas, though his illness is not yet officially recognized as service-related.

His health declined, and he was eventually diagnosed with Behçet's syndrome, rheumatoid arthritis, PTSD, depression, anxiety and liver issues. He lost his job and had to sell his house. He lived in his Nissan Sentra for a year.

Then a woman stole his car in order to get his medication. High on the meds, she totaled it.

So he moved outside, and he remembers standing in the middle of the woods, screaming, “God, what have I done so wrong in my life?” He began drinking again.

Seven years ago, during the holiday season, he came to Triune. I vividly remember him because he carried a huge accordion file with all his medical records and paperwork. He was so organized that he swears I finally asked him, “Are you sure you’re homeless?”

As if he might have forgotten.

Amazingly, a man from one of our AA groups took him in. He lived with him for quite some time, following rules such as time to get up, curfew, and attending meetings. He enrolled in our second-ever Circles group, and graduated.

But then things began to sour. He got housing, let people move in with him, and relapsed. He began using more than alcohol.

People, especially his Circle team, tried to help him repeatedly, but he turned away from them. Finally, many people – wisely – refused to enable his self-destructive behavior any longer.

He continued to work with social workers and case managers at both Triune and United Ministries. Then he moved into the Greenville Rescue Mission for 18 months. He came out and got housing. And relapsed again.

He tried the Salvation Army program for a year. He stayed with private homeowners, including another friend from AA. When that friend died, his grief sent him spiraling out of control.

He got back on his feet and lived in an Oxford House. It ended badly.

About now, you may be wondering why I chose this particular story to share. I do so, because of what Tim sang for us this morning. I believe it with all my heart.

We fall down and we get up.

We fall down and we get up.

We fall down and we get up.

The saints are just the sinners who fall down and get up.

Anyone who works with addiction will tell you that relapse is part of the process. While you may be lucky and get clean on the first try, often it's the third or fifth or seventh or 12th.

Furthermore, we cannot want recovery for you. Even David and Kreg, who break their backs to get addicts into treatment, know that it's up to the addict, not them.

Near the end of 2019, our friend accessed a new doctor through our Bon Secours nurse-practitioner. The doctor helped him get off a lot of prescribed medication. His mind cleared. He is sober and clear-eyed and calm in a way I haven't seen in a long time.

He moved into housing on December 1, just a month ago. He has a payee at Compass of Carolina whom he credits with making that possible. Best of all, the apartment is in a part of town where he's not tempted to bring friends in.

When he agreed to let me share his story this morning, he said, "I've made all the mistakes it's possible to make. Shame on me if I make them again."

Will our friend Russ Reed please stand?

Russ has fallen down and gotten up. More than once.

Because Russ first came to Triune during the holiday season of 2012, it is fitting that he made his move into housing during the holidays once again. As the Scriptures of Epiphany remind us, there can always be a turning and a re-turning toward the light.

Please turn in your Bibles to **Matthew 2:1-12**.

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

We call Matthew the most Jewish of all the gospel writers. By that, we mean that he pulled most extensively from Old Testament prophecy in writing his story of Jesus.

He scoured the Jewish Scriptures for stories of foreign kings coming to pay tribute to the newborn Jewish Messiah. One of them was the prophet Isaiah, who wrote: **“Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.... A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”** (Isaiah 60: 1, 3, 6)

Camels not unlike those in our manger scenes. Gold and frankincense not unlike that carried by Matthew's magi. A light not unlike the starlight they followed.

But aside from these deliberate fulfillments of ancient prophecies, Matthew pulled from a mysterious, little-known story in the book of Numbers. Numbers is near the beginning of our Scriptures, one of the five books of Moses.

Matthew wrote much of his story of Jesus to echo the story of Moses. That made sense because Moses was the greatest hero of the Jewish people. So a Messiah who could walk in the footsteps of the mighty Moses was a Messiah indeed.

Numbers tells a long, long story about one of the challenges Moses faced as he led Israel out of Egypt.

King Balak of Moab feared the Israelites that Moses was leading across his land. So he called upon a seer, a non-Israelite fortuneteller "from the East," named Balaam.

King Balak invited Balaam to curse these new enemies. But though he was not an Israelite, Balaam actually heard a word from the Lord. And so rather than cursing the Lord's people, he blessed them.

Among the many blessings of Balaam are these words about one who would rise from Israel's seed: **“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near — a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel....”**

(Numbers 24: 17)

Balaam's words were first understood to refer to King David. And in later Judaism, they were understood to refer to the coming Messiah.

So now, in Matthew, we read of a literal star, an astrological sign, that beckoned wise men from the East – wise men like Balaam – who recognized the birth of a Messiah. And they followed this star all the way to Judea, all the way to Jerusalem, then all the way to Bethlehem, to the house of Mary and Joseph and the baby.

“A star shall come out of Jacob,” prophesied this ancient wise man from the East.

And Matthew wrote about a star that led other wise men from the East to this descendant of Jacob.

Whether this star is physical or metaphorical, it is a wonderful representation of the light that we know as Jesus. A light that encompasses us, welcomes us, incorporates us into the family of God.

The front of our bulletin intentionally echoes this every single week: *You are God's child, and you are welcome in this place.*

You know, there will always be someone to tell us we don't belong, or we aren't up to par, or we don't measure up. Even if that someone is only in our heads.

That's why I think it's so important for this church to build people up. To remind them they are children of God. To take away society's nay-saying and to tell the truth.

Because the truth is you are made in God's image.

I think when we can convey that, we can begin to fix much of what ails us. That's the goal of the congregational lunch on Sundays.

That's the goal of the art room.

That's the goal of Round Table, where one man told Robin, "This is the most positive two hours of my week."

That's the goal of Circles, where four or five people are committed to cheering you on as you make changes in your life.

And that's the goal of *This Time, Next Year*, in which we highlight someone who's made dramatic improvements in his or her life.

When we highlight someone who's turned to the light.

We all fall down, including the people we introduce in this sermon each year. Including Tandy and me. Including every single person in this sanctuary.

But that's only half the story. The other half is.... We get up.

That's what God's people do. That's what you can do. ... by this time, next year.

Amen.