

PASTORAL PRAYER

Righteous God of mercy and grace overflowing, with you, there are no endings. There are endings with new beginnings. Our service with and for you is a journey that naturally has its low points, but we do not live in the dips. Your Spirit enlivens us and strengthens us for service to come through how we feed on prayer, your word, and fellowship with your people. Walk with us to feel the pains of a world in need, of places that struggle with the stress of war and unrest, the places where a meal and a glass of clean water are a difficult-to-afford luxury, the places where fear dominates and dialogue is impossible. Journey with us to understand what this means for us as your followers.

Holy God, today we recognize the revelation of Christ's coming and what comes after the Epiphany. After any epiphany, there is celebration, but that celebration leads into more work, more tasks, more places to go and things to do. The journey has only begun. Walk with us today, God, as we look at Epiphany through the eyes of journeying. Along the way, God, journey with us to take in the wonders fully, to take heed of and learn from the places where we experience deceit, and to unflinchingly strive to reach the goals we and you set forth. We pray all these things in the name of God who came as a child out of love and goodness, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

Have you seen or heard something so amazing you couldn't believe it? Have you seen something that made you step back and contemplate for a second? Have you seen something which changed you to the very bottom of your soul? Throughout history, many people have. We remember the Roman leader Constantine for his vision of a flaming cross in the sky, with the words "With this sign, conquer" before a battle in 312. He later became

Emperor of the Roman Empire and made Christianity legal and open for the first time. Martin Luther read Romans and realized that the church he served needed work, putting it lightly. John Wesley had his heart “strangely warmed” when he read some of Luther’s work, and the Methodist Church came to be through his work. Dorothy Day picked up a rosary one day, and, through her devotion, would later form a movement to address the needs of the poor and suffering. Martin Luther King Junior had a dream, he shared it with us, and that Dream is still working for change. All of these important figures in history had a “wow” moment in the midst of their journeys. Some of them were more straightforward than others, and the world is never the same because of them. These “wow” moments are known by another name: Epiphany.

Today we recognize the season that starts 12 days after Christmas Day, known as Epiphany. I’m sure you’ve all heard of it, but it really doesn’t get a lot of press. Let’s look more deeply. For your foreign language lesson today, Epiphany comes from the Greek word Epiphaneia, which means “striking appearance” or “manifestation.” In other words, Epiphany is about the appearance of the Christ Child to the peoples of the world; he is known as the manifestation, the incarnation, the made-human form of God on earth. Epiphany is a grand revelation to the human race about the nature of God and how God has come to be and work with us in an entirely new way. It was not done in grand form but came to non-Jews. These first people to see him are some special characters indeed.

As I consider Epiphany, I tend to think of the hymn “We Three Kings.” Epiphany’s main characters, outside of Jesus and the family, are the Magi. There’s a lot to the story of the Magi. Before they were the people for whom God in human form were shown first, they went on a journey; they saw this star in the sky and figured out that the King of the Jews

was born. They went to find him, and the Magi finding Jesus is what we celebrate on the day of Epiphany. In a way, it reminds me of the story of Bilbo Baggins. If you've read or watched the Lord of the Rings, they were Bilbo Baggins before Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo Baggins went on a journey to find something incredible, and wrote a book about it called "There and Back Again." The Magi went "There and Back Again," just like Bilbo Baggins' tale of adventure. The magi journeyed to discover something amazing, and they returned having seen something amazing, but maybe not what they expected. In the same way, we celebrate Epiphany by going "There and Back Again." We have our adventures and journeys in life. We each will have our epiphanies, our "wow!" moments. We need journeys and our epiphanies because they help us find what it means to be faithful people to ourselves and to God. Let us look at Epiphany through what it means to go on our journeys, and let's see what it means to find our "wow" moments along the way. Walk with me as we go "There and Back Again" on our journey of Epiphany, and we'll see if we find any "wow" moments of our own!

What comes to your mind when you hear about journeys? I think of something majestic and fantastic like "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade," where Indiana Jones goes first on a mission to find his lost father, and that turns into a quest to find the Holy Grail. Along the way, he has to encounter people who want to protect the Holy Grail and the Nazis, who want to take it for their own ends. At the end of the movie, although he finds the Holy Grail, he realizes it was never the point of his journey. Indy instead discovered that reconnecting with his father and simply undergoing the quest was worthwhile enough.

Well, journeys almost always are never that grand. They can be much simpler. The Magi had their own journey to reach the side of the Christ Child. What made Epiphany

what it is to us today is that the Magi went on their way to figure out what this new development was. They did not sit and wait, but journeyed intentionally to find the Child who would become King. I believe that Epiphany is a calling to journey, just as much as it is to find our “wow” moments. For Bilbo Baggins, the journey led him to his “wow” moments, his Epiphanies, and for us, the same is true: the journey gives us the “wow” moments.

It is easy to consider what the Magi did as something we can't do today. We almost certainly will not be like Indiana Jones. But we have our own journeys. We undertake journeys all the time, large and small. Journeys are a calling for us, but the point is not to have the end result all mapped out in our minds. Like Indiana Jones at the end of his journey, we will realize that the end result is not always what we thought it would be. If we undertake the journey faithfully, with it will end up the way we need it to be. We can start a journey with ideas in mind. Maybe you are undergoing a journey and not realizing it! Our journeys are not the same, but they are no less important when we have faithful intentions behind our journeys. There are so many journeys we undertake. We are called to know more, to become who God wants us to be, to live fully. For some of you, myself included, coming to Cheyenne was a journey, starting and learning a new job is a journey, learning to be yourself is a journey, tackling those things that prevent you from being fully yourself is a journey. For me, learning to preach and be a pastor to this community is a journey. Learning what family means to you can be a journey, or maybe that lifetime hobby may be a journey. Perhaps it is learning how to be retired which can be a journey, for you and for your spouse. Very few worthwhile things in our lives cannot be called a journey, because they take time and strength to undertake. Journey is such a wide and open word with meanings so varied to who we are, who we want to be, and who God calls us to be as

people. Sometimes they are short term, sometimes long term. When we undertake all our journeys, from a trip to the grocery store to questions of life-changing nature, with intention, being ourselves, and seeking God's glory in all parts, we can be assured that our journeys are worthwhile. We may never have to journey like Mary and Joseph, who had to flee to Egypt, but we can find that our journeys are life-saving in a different way, for they help us to live life for us and for our neighbors and our God more fully.

Journeys are not just about getting there but going there. What gives meaning to the journeys is what we learn from them, which usually come in the form of Epiphanies or "wow" moments. Journeys and "wow" moments are like the two shoes on your feet; we get to the faithful destinations when we have both of them. We undertake the journeys to reach the "wow" moments along the way, and we cannot expect them. We will often understand them only afterwards. The "wow" moments are large and small. With all those examples of people we talked about at the beginning, those who reshaped religious practice and the world around them, they each had a "wow" moment in their own ways. Some happened all at once; some took more time. However, what is important about each of our journeys is that we simply go on the journey with open hearts and open minds.

What epiphanies have you experienced? Are you searching for something huge, like seeing the Christ child firsthand? That may not be the best. It probably is a disservice to think of them as something that is incredible and world changing all at once. Sometimes, they are small realizations that knock you back a notch and help you realize more of who you are and what you are called to be in this world. On the other hand, it may be something someone said to you and only later did you figure out what it was all about. Epiphanies are

“wow” moments that bring you closer to truth. For Indiana Jones, it was having his father’s life in danger before he realized what really mattered: his last remaining family.

For me, it was quite the epiphany to realize that I was an introvert and that it’s OK to be one. Many members of my own family were extroverts who loved to go up to people they didn’t know and start conversations. I would much rather cheer for the Green Bay Packers on a regular schedule than to make a habit of that. It was so very difficult for me, and at times, I felt forced to do that. As I grew older, I had many little experiences on my journey to understand who I am that led to a grand and fantastic epiphany: I am an introvert. I don’t necessarily have the ability to do what extroverts do. I have other gifts and graces that can help me become the best person and leader I can be without having to force myself into being an extrovert. I undertook the journey to understand who God created me to be. Keeping an open heart, I learned there are times I force myself into being something I am not, but when I let the “wow” moments of discovery take hold, I understand that is God at work shaping me into the best person I can be.

Each of us is on many journeys. You may know it, or you may be discovering it. Life is a journey made of many smaller journeys. Some you know about; some you will not know until you reach a time of epiphany, when things make sense to you in a new way. Throughout it all, God is calling. God is calling each of us on our different journeys, whether they be simple or something much more complex. God is calling us together as Faith United Methodist to undertake new journeys all the time. It’s not the destination, but the journey that make all the difference. The “wow” moments along the way from God will lead us in the right direction. Thanks be to God for our journeys in life and the Epiphanies that give them meaning. Amen and Amen.