

January 9, 2022 - Epiphany

Acknowledgment

Welcome/Announcements

Well good morning and welcome to worship with us this morning.

Isn't it lovely that you all get to stay snuggled in where you are hopefully safe and warm to watch worship today?

That's what I'm telling myself... and there are moments when I even believe it!

The truth is I would much much rather be gathered together in community – I'd love to be hearing your mask muffled voices sing songs of praise and share together in prayer.

BUT... it is also true that I am grateful we have the ability to quickly move back to online worship and that we are able to continue to worship together today. I am also grateful that this community of faith takes seriously the safety of our members and of the wider community. Witnessing what has been happening in other provinces, and then hearing Dr. Shahab ask us to refrain from gathering in groups as much as possible... our board executive made the decision to return to online only worship – it is our hope that we will soon be able to return to in person worship and the board will re-evaluate at our end of the month meeting.

Friends, we continue to be challenged by this pandemic... each of us in our own way – with some shared frustrations and fear and disappointment. I posted on my facebook page the other day that I felt like throwing myself on the floor in a full blown tantrum... many many folks responded with their own similar feelings. There was some comfort in that for me. I am not alone in my mix of emotions... and you are not alone in whatever you are feeling either. This has been an unbelievable difficult time for many – and for some more than others. The best thing we can do right now is to pull out all the love and compassion we can muster for ourselves... and for our communities. We need to be kind – and extra patient – with each other. We need to do our best to reflect the light of Christ into the world... even if all we can muster is a tiny little sliver of light – it's something and every little bit helps.

Today we are celebrating Epiphany. We will be hearing about the radical decision of the wise ones to go home by another way. They risked everything by making a choice to do the unexpected – to do everything they could to protect the Christ child so he could grow in love – and share that love with a world that desperately needed it.

Our world desperately needs it too. We can be that love.

Now I want to tell you that I had already planned today's service before the decision to go online was made. I thought about rewriting the service to address this new reality but, I just didn't have it in me. There was a bit of a scramble to get things ready and I simply didn't have the time... this is also why I look like I do. I was cold this morning

and put my toque on my freshly washed hair thinking it didn't matter because I wasn't going to be seeing anyone anyway. I thought about rushing home and adjusting my appearance so you could see me at my best – but... with the encouragement of Diane, one of our office volunteers – I decided to let you see me not at my best. I'm not feeling at my best on the inside so why shouldn't I allow my outside to match.

And this is what you get.

Today's worship is the last in our Advent, Christmas and now epiphany theme of Close to Home. I've really enjoyed moving through this theme with you... I hope you've enjoyed it too.

So let us now move into this time of worship...

Call to Worship/Candle Lighting

We come to this place— each of us on our own path.

The path is winding, and is not always clear, and the path changes, but we are here.

God is walking us home. What a gift it is to not walk alone. Let us worship Holy God.

Gathering Song/Candle Lighting: Hope Shines As The Solitary Star

Invitation to Confession

I imagine that, for the Magi, walking to Bethlehem was not easy.

I imagine that following a star for navigation was *definitely* not easy.

However, I imagine that the hardest part might have been not knowing where the road would lead.

Friends, we are not always the best versions of ourselves when we are faced with uncertainty or changing plans. Facing the unknown pulls on every ounce of our anxiety and fear. It rings all our stress alarms and can erode our patience, our calm, our sense of perspective.

Fortunately for us, we worship a God who is gracious beyond imagination and meets us on every twist and turn of the road home. So let us pray together now, knowing that even in our worst moments, we are held by God.

Prayer of Confession

God of changed plans,

The Magi heard in a dream that they were to take a new way home—a different path, an untraveled road. And to our amazement, they did just that. The Magi packed their bags and went home by another way.

We wish that change could be easy for us, but more often than not, when whispers of change come, we tend to clench our fists and hold on tighter.

Forgive us for resisting change that might be holy.

Forgive us for ignoring that there is more than one road home. Forgive us for failing to hear your invitation.

Guide our steps to unfamiliar places. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Words of Forgiveness

No matter which roads we take in this one wild and precious life,
God walks with us. God never leaves our side. When the road changes and we find
ourselves on a new path home, God is always there.

So hear and believe this good news:

**No matter where we go, no matter what we do, we are claimed, loved, and held by
God. Thanks be to God for a love like that.**

Hymn: I am the Light of the World (VU87 vs 1,2)

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God,

You speak to us in Scripture and in prayers, in sunrises and sunsets,
in friends and in strangers, in dreams and in songs.

You are speaking all the time, and how often do we miss it?

Still our minds so that we can listen with a depth that we have not heard before.

Still our hearts so that we can receive with open arms what it is you are offering us
today.

We know you are speaking, so we are listening. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from
the East came to Jerusalem, asking, '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.' When
King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling
together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the
Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been
written by the prophet:

"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." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when
the star had appeared. Then 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.' When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed
with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to
Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reflection

So its epiphany and we always share the story of the magi on the Sunday of Epiphany. It ends with a very enigmatic phrase... they went home by another road.

That's a very key part of the magi story..

if they had gone home by the road that they had taken to get where Jesus was, they would have gone back to Herod and things would have gone very differently and very poorly for the Holy family.

But they didn't.

They went home by another way.

And that is the theme for our serviced today... Home by Another Way..

I've been pondering what that means for us in our context.

What does it mean for us to go home by another way?

For the Magi... choosing another way home meant resistance... refusing to be pawns in Herod's power games... not playing by the tyrant's rules.

It meant risking everything to protect the Christ child and his family.

Putting their safety... the Magi's own safety on the line... for the sake of the safety of that family.

Reflecting on this call in our lives.. it may raise questions for us..

what am I willing to risk for my faith

and who needs me to take bold, courageous action for the sake of their survival.

A very real and relevant question for us as we contemplate climate crisis and the interconnectedness of life across this planet.

It also invites us to ask

"are there systems of power that are operating today that need to be resisted?"

"what are they?" and

"what does that resistance look like for us?".

Those are some of the questions that came to mind for me as I was thinking about what it means for me to do what the Magi did.

But then I was mulling over the whole notion of "home by another way" and that phrase "another way" kept coming up for me. And its come up for me all year mostly because the daily meditations that I read each day from Richard Rohr have been focusing on a very similar kind of theme...

another way.

I've been thinking about that a lot in the context of this year that has just ended.

2021 started... for me anyway and I think for most of us... with a whole lot of hope...

we had kicked 2020 to the curb –

hallelujah – we were all together in this one glorious "hallelujah – 2021 is going to be so much better than 2020."

And very quickly things started to fall apart.

And, in fact, it seems that 2021 very quickly became characterized by division... by this sort of entrenching...

if before there was a divide between the political left and political right – now it feels as if there's a great chasm that cannot be traversed. And our world so united in some ways by covid seems to have been ripped apart by the advent of the covid vaccines... which I don't know that any of us foresaw.

And it just seems like we are so... in every aspect of our lives... so full of us and them. There's "those people who think like that and do those kinds of things" and then there's "us who do these kinds of things and think these ways."

And these divisions are affecting us not just at a political.. or societal level but right in our own families.

I have spoken with so many families in the lead up to the holidays who were having such anxiety about what they were going to do for a family gathering over the holiday because of the divisions that were right within their own family... over questions of vaccines and covid and masking and all of it.

We seem to have lost any sense of middle ground – in our politics and even in our attitudes about... anything – like you're with me or you're against me... you either agree with me on everything or you agree with me on nothing. And if we don't agree... then I can't even talk to you.

Does any of this sound familiar?

It certainly looks that way to me. And it grieves me.

And I feel it in my own heart... its not just what I'm observing out there. I catch myself with these thoughts all the time. How can those people dot dot dot... What's wrong with them?

And the other thing I do... and I know that others do it too because I hear it ... we don't just disagree with one another, we vilify those we disagree with.

Those people who.... make whatever choice it is – let's take vaccines for an example... those people who choose to be vaccinated are ignorant pawns of the state... they don't even care that their freedoms are being eroded... or they aren't thinking about how the vaccine is operating in their body... what long term effects there might be.

And meanwhile, those who are pro vaccine have a very similar litany – those people who refuse to be vaccinated – they are destroying our society – they are the ones responsible for our hospital’s situation – they’re the ones dragging out this pandemic... they don’t care about other people.

Any of those thoughts sound familiar?

I’ve had those thoughts... I think many of us have.

There’s this vilification of those who we disagree with and it leads to a kind of contempt for others... and a dehumanizing, I think.

And that’s where we find ourselves at the end of 2021, the beginning of 2022.

And so I’ve been thinking about what it means... to go home by another way.

Clearly the way of “I’m right, you’re wrong” isn’t getting us to that home in God’s shalom to which we are called.

So what would another way look like?

Well, friends at the end of 2021 one of the great theologians and activists and justice seekers of our time died – Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

He was a man who lived another way... who understood what another way looked like in practice.

As just one example from his rich and storied life...

after the fall of apartheid in South Africa, Desmond Tutu founded.. headed up.... South Africa’s... and the world’s... first Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The man took serious flack from multiple sides of the issue because a principle of the Truth and Reconciliation that Tutu insisted on was that those who came forward and shared honestly could possibly receive amnesty –

that there could actually be an openness to and forgiveness for those who confessed their participation in the injustices of apartheid

AND not only that, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission didn’t just point fingers at the injustice on the side of the Apartheid state, it also pointed fingers at the injustice perpetrated by those who resisted Apartheid in violent ways and acknowledged that atrocities were committed not by one side or the other but by both.. and, in fact, by many different sides... in the struggle against Apartheid.

And that outraged many... on the left on the right on the pro-apartheid.. on the anti apartheid.

But Tutu wasn’t for this side or that side, he was for truth and for justice and for reconciliation and for healing.

And that required a different way.

It required not taking this side or that side and proving the rightness of one position and the wrongness of another...

it required standing for justice and honouring the humanity of every single person... as a child of God...

as somebody deserving of and in need of forgiveness.

And every single person as somebody who had been harmed by a profoundly unjust system who needed healing and restoration.

He could see that and he could live that in relation to others.

I believe that his legacy and the legacy of so many others who were able to see and truly live another way is the gift to us in this time that will help us to heal the divides that are splitting us apart as families, as a society... as a world.

I am not talking about finding a middle ground on a political spectrum.

I'm not talking about taking the far left and taking the far right

or taking the fully anti-vaxxers and the fully vaxxers and finding a happy medium – like the “maybe vaxxed”.

I'm not talking about that.

Tutu wasn't a middle ground kind of person.

Like “maybe apartheid” or “maybe some compromise”.

He did not compromise with injustice... no matter who was perpetrating it.

He was uncompromising in his call for justice and honouring of the integrity and dignity of every person.

And he was able to love even the perpetrators of injustice.

He didn't hate them.

I wouldn't believe such a path were possible if folks like Desmond Tutu had not trod that road before us.

But they have.

And so while my heart struggles to expand... to incorporate that kind of love... that kind of honouring of the other, even when we disagree profoundly about important things – I struggle with that but I do know it is possible...

because not only did Jesus live that but many others have followed in his footsteps and lived that way.

And have shown us what it looks like...and it looks like self-sacrifice at times.

It looks like profound risk... it looks like not always being popular... it looks like humility... and determination.

It looks like love.

First... last and always.

Love for those we think are enemies.

A willingness to listen and to really try to understand those who think differently than us.

I just want to share one experience with you... its around the question of vaccinations.

I've had the privilege of speaking with a number of people who think very differently than I do about vaccines.

People who adamantly refuse to be vaccinated.

People who are very much against government requirements that people be vaccinated to be in group settings.

And I have yet to speak to a single person who I could characterize as not caring about others.

None of them don't care about others.

They care very deeply about others... they care very deeply about justice... and about society.

In some cases they have a different set of priorities than I do about what they're concerned about in society... or what honouring people's well being looks like.

In some cases they are very afraid of the vaccine and have a real fear for all of us that we're being dooped and that we're being harmed by the vaccine.

I don't have to... and I don't... share those perspectives... but I can recognize in what they are saying that they are caring, loving, concerned people... and that I can identify with.

That's where we're on the same page.

And that's where I've actually been able to have conversations with folks who differ profoundly with me on the question of whether or not we should be vaccinated... and to come away from those conversations having recognized and honoured and affirmed not just the humanity of the other... but their care and their concerns and we still disagree but we are not at odds.

Now... if my only goal were to convince everyone ...

and I'm not saying that I don't have this goal...

but if my ONLY goal were to convince everyone that we should all be vaccinated... then I would have failed in those conversations.

If that is my only goal then I am missing something very important.

I think perhaps for each one of us who seek to be followers of Jesus.. our first and foremost goal... is to recognize everyone – ourselves and everyone else –

as beloved children of God... torn up with confusion and fear, no doubt... with different ideas about what it means to walk in a good way... but as relatives of mine.

Relatives who I am first and foremost called to love... to cherish...to honour...

and when we disagree, to still cherish and honour them – to still listen – to defend their dignity and integrity... even when we have to go separate ways.

So that is what I invite us to contemplate this year as we seek to walk in the footsteps of those marvelous wise ones who, so long ago, met and worshipped the Christ child. May we seek in this year to go home by another way.

A way of love.

A way of healing.

A way that recognizes, cherishes and honours the humanity of others.

And I will close with a quote by Archbishop Desmond Tutu...

In Africa recognition of our interdependence is called ubuntu. It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong to the whole, to the community, to the tribe, to the nation, to the earth. Ubuntu is about wholeness, about compassion for life.

Ubuntu has to do with the very essence of what it means to be human, to know that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life. In our fragile and crowded world we can survive only together. We can be truly free, ultimately, only together. We can be human Only together.

Amen.

Hymn: A Light is Gleaming

Prayers of the People

God of The Way,

We all have roads we travel.

We travel emotional roads—the narratives we tell ourselves, the mental places we revisit again and again, the assumptions and the fears we know by heart.

Then there are physical roads—the places in our lives that we walk every day, grocery stores and coffee stands, subways and carpool lines.

And then there are roads of our society—the paths carved out that we are expected to follow, dress and etiquette, education and rules, so many things unspoken, but built in stone all the same.

So today we remember the Magi—who traveled, who knows how long, down a dusty road to get to you.

Holy God, we too want to be people that travel mental, physical, and cultural roads to get to you.

We want to gather in your sanctuary. We want to remember you in our prayers. We want our hearts to know the way home, the way back to you, by perfect memory.

Help us get to that place, for we long to be journeying toward you.

In addition to the road the Magi traveled to you, we also remember the road they took home—a road home by another way.

So, God, when the world cries out for violence and vengeance, show us that road—show us home by another way.

And when the world cries out in scarcity and fear, show us that road—show us home by another way.

And when we find ourselves on a path that could hurt us, show us that road—show us home by another way.

God we are walking.

This life is a journey.

Be in our steps, that we might be led to you. Be in our eyes, that we might see you.

Be in our hearts, that we might be brave enough to go home by another way. Now with the confidence of children, we pray together, saying... **Our Father...**

Hymn: Arise Your Light is Come (VU 79)

Benediction

As we leave *this* service, we remember that our service begins:

Let's comfort the homesick.

Open our doors to others.

Seek sanctuary.

Be brave enough to go home by another way.

And remember that in God's house, wherever that may be for you, all are welcomed

In the name of our Foundation—God, Spirit, and Son— go in peace

Sung Blessing: We Are Marching