

“Go Forth and Reveal”
Lake Shore Baptist Church
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The word *epiphany* means manifestation or discovery, coming from the Latin and Greek roots meaning “to reveal, to show, to make known.” It’s that “aha” moment when something “clicks.” In the church calendar Epiphany, capital “E,” is when we observe the wise men who visit baby Jesus with their three gifts thereby revealing or showing who Jesus was—savior to all.

As foreigners who travel far, they make real Simeon’s prophecy when Jesus’ parents brought him to the temple as a baby and Simeon proclaimed the child would be a “light for revelation to the Gentiles.” And lo and behold wise men from the East—wise *but very Gentile*—follow the light of a star to find him and worship him. It is so very strange—grown men following signs in the sky to bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh to a baby—a baby not of their culture or religion, who did not belong to their region nor they to his.

It was what you might call an aha moment for the world, an epiphany: This child really did come for all, and even the stars in the heavens aligned just so to prove it true.

In church culture, Epiphany marks the end of Christmastide. We’ve theoretically spent twelve days feasting and celebrating the birth of the Christ. Epiphany marks the day when the feasting ends and the real work of Christmas begins—that is, the wise men show us what we are now called to do. We are called to make Christ known, to make God’s love known, to reveal with startling clarity that God’s love and salvation and son are for everyone, no exceptions.

I came across an Epiphany prayer that went like this, “God, we thank you for revealing yourself to us in Jesus the Christ, we who once were not your people but whom you chose to adopt as your people. As ancient Israel confessed long ago, we realize that it was not because of our own righteousness, or our own superior wisdom, or strength, or power, or numbers. It was simply because you loved us, and chose to show us that love in Jesus.

As you have accepted us when we did not deserve your love, will you help us to accept those whom we find it hard to love? Forgive us, O Lord, for any attitude that we harbor that on any level sees ourselves as better or more righteous than others. Will you help us to remove the barriers of prejudice and to tear down the walls of bigotry, religious or social? O Lord, help us realize that the walls that we erect for others only form our own prisons!”

God, help us realize the walls that we erect for other only form our own prisons. Epiphany is when people cross borders. No only do the wise men cross borders to find Jesus, shortly after that, Jesus and his family cross over into Egypt to escape Herod’s attempt to kill him. Just imagine if entry into Egypt were blocked off by a wall.

Perhaps God could have found another way or another country to protect the Christ child, but Egypt would have missed out on housing the Son of God. Since Herod was on a killing rampage, I’m going to assume it wasn’t just Mary and Joseph fleeing for safety, wanting to protect their

child. Egypt may have seen hoards of refugees that year. Imagine that. Egypt—the very place that oppressed and enslaved the Hebrew people way back when—now a refuge and a home for the ancestors of their former slaves whom God liberated. These refugees they welcomed included Jesus, who would be willing to save even them, the once oppressors of his people. Imagine if they had shut him out. Imagine if they had built a wall. Imagine if they had closed themselves off to their own redemption, their savior, the forgiveness and grace of God.

Or imagine a wall around Israel that prevented the wise men from entering to see the child. Imagine no Epiphany.

In the Christian tradition there is no place for walls. We are called, not to hide and to isolate, but to go forth and reveal God's love. As the author of Ephesians puts it, "In his flesh, Christ has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

Undoubtedly this has *political* implications, because we know that our call is to welcome the stranger and show hospitality to the foreigner. As it says in the Rule of St. Benedict, "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed.'" "

Now, it is not as if we can really expect our public leaders to reflect the rule of St. Benedict or the call of Christ since, as Baptists, we do not impose our religion on others. So what can we do? When public leaders claim to be Christian but do not reflect the hospitality of Christ, we can name that as unholy. We can influence policy with our voices and our presence. We can continue to educate ourselves and others about the U.S. immigration system so that we know and understand "legal entry" often requires years and so many endangered families simply cannot wait years just like Mary, Joseph, and the child could not have waited years to escape Herod. We can thereby be a Christian witness in these inhospitable times. We might even cross borders of our own and dialogue with those whom we disagree, allowing them into our lives and refusing to build a wall between us. We can tear down walls *and* remember the humanity of the wall builders, even as we seek to dismantle their work. We can remember the humanity of the immigrant, no matter their background or story. We can remember that we have very little right to this land we occupy—this land we stole from the native people and made our own through illegal bloodshed and domination.

Epiphany is the season for "aha's" and you simply cannot experience them hiding behind walls. This includes the walls we erect around our selves, refusing to let our vulnerabilities show and denying other people entrance into who we really are, warts and all. Undoubtedly this has *personal* implications.

Epiphany calls us to journey where we have never been, to be open to insights we did not expect, to discover God in impoverished places, among stables and not palaces. As wise as they supposedly were, the wise men first went looking for the child among palaces and kings. I take it they temporarily took their eyes off the star and followed their preconceptions about where one should find a king. Even the wise get confused and follow the wealth and the glam rather than the direction of heaven.

I am convinced we will find God not only among the impoverished in our communities, but also we will find God in those places in us that are impoverished. Imagine that. That stable out back where you hide your filth? God is being born in there, if only you would pay that place a visit. The parts of you that feel most broken, most dark, most unacceptable for visitors . . . God wants to nestle in just there. Look for God in the places where you hurt, and you might just be surprised. You might even think, “Aha, I didn’t know God’s love could reach me here, but look at that. God took my wound and made it a birthplace, a womb, a manger, a crib.”

Walls are always built by fear. Tearing down my own inner walls is a life-long work, and I get scared, over and over again to face myself. But it happens, little bit by little bit, brick by brick, I stop hiding from myself. It happens in the context of therapy, it happens in the intimacy of good friendships, it happens in the privacy of prayer, in the quiet of retreat, and even in the holy turmoil of a difficult season. Walls start tumbling, and at first that feels like chaos, like I’ve opened myself to threat. And truth be told, it is always a bit dangerous to let the walls come down. Someone might hurt you. But also, someone might love you. Joy might find you. Life might happen. Walls keep out some of the pain, but they keep out the good too, and they definitely keep out the healing.

My prayer for you is that you experience an epiphany of love this season. You may have to look in places you didn’t expect. You may have to tear down a brick or two—no need to do the whole wall at once. Start small. Just start. Journeys take time, and you cannot rush them, whether they are inner journeys or outer ones. There is a very strong chance you are more loved than you could possibly know. There is a very strong chance you are more capable of bravery than you thought. There is a very strong chance you don’t need so many walls. May God bless you and keep you all along the way. Amen.