

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY
January 6, 2019

I'm glad that the story of the wisemen is told apart from the actual celebration of Christmas. With bits and pieces of Christmas still around us we now turn to *what happens after*. It's a sort of *so now what?* Or, *what difference does this make in our daily lives?* I know of no better statement to this Epiphany question than the words, the poetry, of Dr. Howard Thurman from a collection called, "The Mood of Christmas." First Dr. Thurman speaks of Christmas as a time to *lift the spirit*.

"A time of illumination when candles burn and old dreams find their youth again."

"A time of pause."

"When love whispers its magic word to everything that breathes."

Oh, he IS a poet!

Then he speaks of putting our own gifts on the altar. Gifts like:

"the quiet hopes that flood the earnest cargo of my dreams"

"the best of all good things for those I love"

"a fresh new trust"

"seeing in each day the seeds of the morrow"

Then Dr. Thurman turns to something he calls "The Work of Christmas." That's the Epiphany-part. We'll come back to this.

The Feast of the Epiphany marks the beginning of a new year and the beginning of a new journey. This is what I like most about the imagery of this day—the journey of the wise men, the kings, the magi—whatever we might call them. We begin this new season with the image of three old men, wise in years, kingly in demeanor, following a wild star across miles of desert and hard terrain in the company of camels and caravan. We usually think of the three magi wandering alone across the scene, over hills and dales. This is the way you see them on Christmas cards. But if you get realistic, there would have been hundreds in their company. Camel herders, cooks, scouts, drivers, wagon repairmen, tentsmen, Maybe even a security patrol. A journey of this magnitude isn't as simple as heading out with a simple backpack and roll and a can of Spam. But I digress. It's a journey that we are all on. It's the best way to describe life itself. If taken seriously, it's hard and it's long. Who ever told us this journey of life would be easy? They did us a disservice because it's best to be prepared.

While we might think that we understand the meaning of the word *journey*—“the course of travel to a particular place usually for a specific purpose” —there is a big difference between a *jaunt* to the nearest beach and an *expedition* to a rain forest. While a trip might be either long or short, for business or for pleasure and taken at either a rushed or leisurely pace, a *journey* suggests that a considerable amount of time and distance will be covered and that the travel will take place over land. A long trip by water or through air or space is a *voyage*. Remember Star Trek's VOYAGER? But I digress again. On long *journey* there is always time for a bit of digression. A short, casual trip for pleasure or recreation is called a *jaunt*. *Excursion* also applies to a brief pleasure trip usually no more than a day in length that returns to the same place where it began. Then, there are *expeditions* and *pilgrimages*. These are taken for a specific purpose. *Expeditions* are usually made up by organized groups while *pilgrimages* are *journeys* to places that have religious or emotions significance.

I thought I had covered all the possibilities but then as I looked in front of me this morning, out my car window, I saw that I was following a car called an *Odyssey*. This introduces the aspect of *adventure* into the mix of a long and hard *journey*.

Now that we have our terms straight we can see that *journey* by definition is hard and long, covers a great distance, and all in all, is quite serious and may include *adventures*. A *jaunt* may sound fun, but at the end of the day there is no wisdom and real depth to be awarded. There is just not enough time for true discoveries. The Epiphany story we are given, following the *paused beauty* of Christmas, is the picture— the framework of life—we have been given, life as a *journey*. It is the very framework offered from our religious heritage. It prescribes our visions. It prescribes our understandings and meanings and expectations. It prescribes the choices we make. And, perhaps it helps to give us the strength we need to make such a journey—knowing that it will be long and difficult. From Adam and Eve who were expelled from the Garden and forced to set out on a journey to Abraham, called the wandering Aramean, And there was Joseph in Egypt and Moses and Joshua *journeying* to the Promised Land. And Jesus. He was on a human *journey* from God, back to God. We see his life's meaning most clearly in his final *journey* to Jerusalem.

Sometimes I wonder why I do what I do. I've been coming here to Epiphany for over 30 years. I've been driving down the same roads, opening the same doors, walking down the same aisle here in the same church for all these years. Folding bulletins. I wonder how many bulletins we've folded, Maryellen! It must be 10,000 or more. I wonder why this Jesus is still the Star of my life who keeps me moving and moving and moving— discovering new things and meeting new people. I do recall that on the many pilgrimages we have taken together over the years one of the important discoveries we have made is

that a *pilgrimage* is really about the people with whom you do the traveling! It's a lesson learned from Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales." Remember that early English writing? It is a collection of stories the travelers tell to each other along the way, as they walk to Canterbury, England. In the same way, the *journey* here at Epiphany is about the people and the life stories we share with each other along the way. I am amazed as I remember who we were then, and then, and then—and now, as part of who we are becoming. Photography instructors will tell you that when you are looking for a great shot turn around. While everyone is clicking their cameras on what is ahead down the road, turn around and look behind you with your camera. The "great shot," the one that is surprising and beautiful, is often behind you. When I look back, I'm surprised by how young we were and how many of us there have been. I can see and remember the surprise and joy of getting to know new people who show up along the way! I can see the occasions and circumstances we have faced together and celebrated together—the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows. I am amazed! Amazed and grateful for the *journey*. Amazed and grateful for who we have become while on the *journey*. Not in terms of the world's definitions but in some other light. That's when wisdom cuts in. The *journey's* the thing! The people. The companionship. God himself, in the love of Jesus Christ, here in this *journeying* community. This place has been much prayed in. Cried in. Laughed in. The love of Jesus Christ in and through the bread and wine, the food and nourishment of community on this human journey—from God, back to God.

People tell me all the time, that they are struggling in their spiritual and vocational journeys. Struggling with life itself. And I say, "Ah, yes." They tell me more and I say, "Ah, yes." I don't know if they catch on exactly to what I am saying. But, you see, there isn't a "fix" for living. It's a long and difficult *journey*. The struggle is the very stuff of the *journey*. The engagement. The walk. The very stuff of life. The difference, I suppose, when wisdom kicks in, is when you realize that you are not alone but are surrounded by

camels and a whole caravan of people who want to go with you— who ARE going with you. And that star that leads you, is none other than God in Christ, here in our midst leading the way. For in the love of Christ, God draws the whole world to himself.

Here's what Dr. Thurman has to say about this Epiphany *journey* we are on:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry.
To release the prisoner.
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers [and sisters]
To make music in the heart.

Finally, Dr. Thurman writes,

I will sing a New Song.
The old song of my spirit has wearied itself out.
I must learn the new song for the new needs.
I must prepare for new melodies
that have never been mine before.
I will sing, this day, a new song unto the Lord.

Let's on with this journey, together! Find the lost. Heal the broken. Feed the hungry. Release the prisoner. Rebuild. Bring peace. Make music—new melodies we have never sung before. Together.

AMEN