

**Taking the Same Old Road?  
Matthew 2: 1-15  
Don Lincoln**

Tomorrow, January 6<sup>th</sup>, is Epiphany. Epiphany is one of the earliest Christian festivals, celebrated well before the date for Christmas was set on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Epiphany celebrates the first revelation of God's incarnation in the birth of the Messiah, to those who came to worship and recognized the Lord's coming in Jesus.

In more general terms, epiphany means a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential meaning of something; an illuminating discovery, a realization, a disclosure. Simply stated, epiphany is an "Aha!" **moment** – that rearranges one's thinking, and usually one's direction.

Along with the epiphany of God's coming in a baby, our story tells us these visitors from the East receive another "aha" moment in a dream. That they should not take the usual route home, passing by Herod's place as they had on their way. So they went home by another road.

I remember the year I had an Epiphany Epiphany. It was my fourth year at Westminster. The congregation had a tradition of cutting a King cake on Epiphany Sunday. Who remembers?

Westminster's King Cake was a large sheet cake in the shape of a cross big enough to serve the entire congregation, with a dozen small silver crosses baked inside, to be worn all year by each person lucky enough to find one in their piece of cake.

Tradition also was that the cake should be cut into serving size pieces by the pastors, before the congregation gathered in Spellman Hall could finish singing through a verse and refrain of "We Three Kings."

By my fourth Epiphany, the congregation's growth had necessitated a larger King cake – now with 24 crosses. We had added a third Sunday service, and there was no convenient time to gather EVERYONE in Spellman Hall – and the cake bakers laughed at the suggestion they bake cakes for each service. And in 2004, there were now four pastors – me, Ann Dickey, Wes Smith, and Tony Sundermeier.

The upright beam of the cross-cake spanned TWO eight-foot tables – and we four pastors positioned ourselves with 12-inch kitchen knives to cut the cake before the song was done. We succeeded in doing so – with rapid, single stroke sweeping cuts, but not before one of us – I don't remember who – but one pastor had a grazing slice on his arm from another pastor's knife.

My Epiphany Epiphany – our collective “Aha!” that day – was time had come to put the King Cake tradition to bed.

Some of you know that Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. Full of Old Testament citations; and outlining in great detail Jesus’ Jewish ancestry – name by name by name by name by name by name by name – generation to generation. But here, at the outset of his very Jewish story, very Jewish Matthew introduces Jesus by telling about the magi – outsiders, aliens, non-Jews, Gentiles – **ARABS** in fact – at the manger.

These guys don’t know the Hebrew Scriptures – or they wouldn’t have stopped and asked Herod how to find this baby. They would’ve known the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. They’re seekers from outside. They’re the wrong culture, the wrong race, the wrong denomination, the wrong religion. Think about it.

In a world where the three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are often not only cast as enemies, but often, tragically, act like enemies – Islamic extremists bombing churches, targeting Jews; Jewish extremists bombing mosques and hurling rocks at Palestinian children – the rise of Islamophobia and antisemitism in this country – it is stunning to realize that here, in this very JEWISH story, that becomes the foundational CHRISTIAN story, the first visitation from the larger world are a handful of wise men from IRAN.

Any epiphany for you and me in this story? Just as an epiphany – a new understanding – had these wise men decide to take a different route home, and avoid the despot King Herod?

Is it possible the vast majority of peaceful adherents to these three faiths with common roots in Abraham, could lift up that vast arena of common ground we share about serving God and loving neighbor, and seek a new road for the world which would avoid the same old road of power and violence that has so characterized our interaction with one another? Are those kind of epiphanies possible?

What epiphanies – what “aha moments” have you experienced in this past year that suggest you take a different road in the coming year? We know epiphanies are happening to us all the time if we pay attention. Some of us learned you can’t predict the blooming schedule of sunflowers. Others of us learned there ARE things that can be done about affordable housing. We learned the right artist can bring hundreds of the emerging generation into our building for community, fellowship, music and worship.

What are your epiphanies? Those “aha moments” in this last year that have spoken to your heart?

Several of my epiphanies this year have been about racism. And the advantage, the privilege I enjoy because of white normativity. It’s some of what we’ll talk about at 12:15 today in Spellman Hall.

Some startling “ahas” for me this year. One, I learned that the GI Bill, which rocketed my father and so many like him into a middle-to-upper-middle class stratosphere after WWII, the GI Bill, while available to the one-million African American soldiers who also fought in that war, wasn’t really available to them. Because redlining in neighborhoods, college quotas, and the lending practices of financial institutions meant less than 5% of the African American soldiers could actually take advantage of the GI Bill.<sup>1</sup> The great equalizer wasn’t. That was an “Aha” for me. And white normativity? What have I realized?

1. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against assumptions of financial reliability.
2. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
3. If a police officer pulls me over, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.
4. I can choose Band-Aids in “flesh” color and have them more less match my skin.

That’s what white normativity looks like. “Aha!” I’m not sure what this deepening understanding of systemic racism will mean for me and my life, but it’s clear to me I am now on a different road than I was before.

Which is the way it always is in the church. Thanks be to God. Inspired by the love of this Word made flesh, and by new understanding, Jesus’ eternal message of radical inclusivity has caused the church to change its mind over and over again – change traditions, and teachings – as new understanding came to pass. Years ago, for the most part, maybe not in practice but at least in doctrine, we changed our understanding about race. In my lifetime we changed about the role of women in the church; and we changed our thinking about sexual orientation. And because of it, the church has found itself going home by a different way – a way more akin to the ways of Jesus.

I invite you, as you come to this table today – to join me as we open ourselves up to what this past year’s epiphany moments or those that are right over the horizon for us that we have yet to see – moments that have taught us and will teach us about what it means to love God and love neighbor – and to be strengthened here for the journey ahead – by whatever new roads God might be inviting us to travel.

May it be so. Amen.