

January 4, 2004

A NEW YEAR'S EPIPHANY

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-13; Matthew 2:1-12

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

We spent New Year's Day in Pennsylvania babysitting our granddaughters, age four and nine months. Our daughter and son-in-law were celebrating their wedding anniversary out of town and we got the girls for a few days.

It was the first extended time away for Karen and Billy and the four-year-old, Olivia, really missed her mommy and daddy. To distract her and to kill some time, we decided to go to McDonald's for lunch and then take a trial run to the airport to make sure I could find my way.

We didn't know where McDonald's was, but Olivia guided us straight there. Imagine that! What marketing genius — four-year-olds know the way to McDonald's!

After lunch and the trip to the airport we returned home. As we were taking off our coats, Olivia put her hands on her hips and said, "Well, that went well."

It's that time of year. The New Year is a time most of us think back over the last year and evaluate how well it went. We look forward in hope wondering how this New Year will go.

It's also Epiphany season in the church. The church calendar reminds us that we Christians mark time in a different way. The church calendar is organized around the life of Jesus and we order our lives around him. Jesus Christ is the organizing principle of life. He takes our ordinary time and transforms it into extraordinary time. In the process he transforms us by re-ordering our lives by his power.

We don't use the word "epiphany" much. When we do we refer to some epiphany we had. We mean a flash of insight, something suddenly revealed or understood. And, we usually mean some religious insight.

The biblical idea is much larger than personal epiphanies. Rather than referring to dictionary definitions, let's look at the idea of "epiphany" in today's Scripture Lessons. Each, in its own way, proclaims that light, the very light of God, is given to the world. Or, the light from God has appeared on earth. That light is epiphany.

The Old Testament lesson promises that a time is coming when God will light up the world. The darkness that covers the earth will be rolled back and God will appear in glory. That divine light will draw the nations of the world to God. And the people of God will be all lit up with God's light so the watching world can see. So, the prophet cries out, "rise, shine; for your light has come."

The light of the world did come. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, God's light. We've beheld God's glory, John's gospel says, in the face of Jesus Christ. So, it's time to rise and shine!

The story of the Wise Men is about light and the light appearing in the world. The Wise Men followed the star, a fixed point of light in the sky, to Bethlehem where they encountered the light of the world, Jesus.

The Epistle Lesson is Paul's explanation of his role in God's plan for the ages. This light from God, Paul says, is intended for all people on earth. God entrusted him to bring that light to the Gentile nations. It's God's plan that the whole world see the light revealed in Jesus and that every human being be lit up with God's light. That's a great mystery, Paul says. Glory to God!

A Christian New Year includes the Light of the World, Jesus Christ, the epiphany of God. As we face this new year, we want him to shine on our lives. He calls us to follow him through the days of this year — like wise men! Jesus Christ wants to lead all of us into a new life found in faith in Christ.

My granddaughter, Olivia, showed a wisdom beyond herself and the conventional wisdom of four year olds. She was imitating her parents when she said, "That went well. She's early on a long journey to maturity. Along the way, she will be enlightened by many conventional (and unconventional) wisdoms. She'll listen, learn and sort things out. And someday, she'll know what these words and wisdoms mean. She will find her destiny."

It's like the Wise Men. They were likely astrologers from Persia, to the east. The people there believed that life, destiny and the future of the world were determined by the stars and planets. The movement of the planets among the fixed points of the stars was a map for life. The Wise Men were experts who read the stars and predicted the destiny of people and nations.

Persian conventional wisdoms were one of many conventional wisdoms back then. Many Romans sincerely believed that personal and national destiny were determined by the position of the entrails in animals sacrificed to the gods. Street cleaners and the Emperor organized their lives around this conventional wisdom.

In Israel, most people thought the faithful and literal obedience of 613 laws determined one's life and fate. They organized their lives around obedience to the law of God.

The Wise Men, to their surprise, discovered some very good news in the old heavens. It was a new star. One day there was a new fixed point in the heavens. It challenged their conventional wisdom. They determined the new star might mean the birth of a great king in the west. They decided to follow the light of the star. They ended up in Bethlehem. There they found the light of the world, the Christ Child.

Already they discovered that God's light is an unconventional wisdom. They didn't find a baby Caesar, nor was destiny's child in a palace. He wasn't in a religious temple either, not even God's temple.

Destiny, the Wise Men discovered, is not found in the stars, in animal guts or religious laws. Destiny, your destiny and the destiny of the world, is found in a person.

Jesus grew up and when he was a man he called men, women and children to follow him. He taught them a new way of life. He told them to organize their lives and their faith around him and his new unconventional wisdom.

His new way was different to be sure. His example and his teaching don't affirm the conventional wisdoms of any age. In fact, Jesus challenges the conventional wisdom of every age. His final throne was a cross that determines the future of the world. He sent his disciples out to tell the world about this new light lightens every one who believes in him.

Now here we are, followers of Jesus 20 centuries later. We are surrounded by conventional wisdoms that tell us about our world, our work, our politics, our relationships and most everything else in life.

We summon these conventional wisdoms this time of the year to help guide us into the New Year. Each contemporary conventional wisdom calls us in its own way, Come follow me! They compete to be the fixed point around which we organize our lives — and our faith.

Many, if not most, conventional wisdoms tell us to make sense of our lives by being devoted to ourselves. They tell us life is about us, about how to be significant, how to be happy. Listen to the voices telling us that life is about our rights, our choices, our own moral code, our well-being, our success. Often this advice comes at the expense of good sense, good health, our families, our children and, ultimately, our faith. You can have a designer family, we hear. Even the church sometimes offers designer Christian families if we join up and join in. Your success, your Christian success — guaranteed.

Have you noticed that in a neighborhood like ours, how often children become badges of our own success? Sad, but true.

At worst, conventional wisdoms are self-destructive. We live in a celebrity culture. Celebrities are in the news, make the news. They are offered as models of the good life. Millions aspire to have a celebrity life.

We even listen to celebrity opinions about really important topics. Like, what movie stars think about anything is significant. Last week I heard a news report that old rocker Joan Jett is supporting one of the Democrat candidates for president. So what? Who should care what a rock singer thinks about anything?

The real problem of celebrity is we're given the idea that they can indulge in bad behavior without consequences. It appears the stars can do whatever they want and get away with it. If only we could be like that, we think. It's very attractive to a shallow, me-first culture and it's destructive.

At their best conventional wisdoms tell us we can be significant and even make a difference. In some cases it's true. But good sense is not the light of God. In fact, Paul told the Corinthian Christians that God's wisdom is fundamentally different from human wisdom. To rely ultimately on human wisdom is folly, he taught.

Even religious conventional wisdoms these days sound like ordinary conventional wisdoms. Christian literature and churches tell us how to maximize our potential, be a real success, have a truly great life — without cost and without negative consequences.

A Christian New Year is an Epiphany experience. Jesus Christ offers a new fixed star for life that leads us out of and beyond mere conventional wisdoms. Jesus himself is the wisdom of God. He calls to follow him. He offers a way of life that is truly wise. He doesn't call us to success. Jesus calls us to do what he says and to become like him.

That means your spiritual formation, your life, organized around Jesus Christ is the number one priority for 2004. That means our significance is determined by another standard. Jesus put it quite simply — yet impossibly. This unconventional wisdom will reorder you and your whole life. Jesus said, Love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself. That's it!

I think children are wiser than adults much of the time. They know what's really significant. In fact, I suspect that's why Jesus said being his disciple means thinking like a child. Olivia doesn't care if I'm a C.E.O. or the custodian. She doesn't care if I went to Harvard or VoTech. All she cares about is that I love her and get down on the floor and play with her and she loves me without conditions. That's significance!

The New Year, the year of our Lord 2004, is a call to commitment. Jesus calls us to order our lives around him and his word. Will you commit your life to him? Will you commit yourself anew to love this covenant community? Will you commit to the world and love God's world? That's real wisdom.

Martin Luther put it this way in an Epiphany sermon,

If we Christians would join the Wise Men, we must close our eyes to all that glitters before the world and look rather on the despised and foolish things, help the poor, comfort the despised, and aid the neighbor in his need.