

From midnight early Friday morning, and probably for at least the next week, we are going to be hearing the expression, “Happy New Year!” As people of God we can add our prayers to that wish, and say, “A Happy and Blessed New Year to you!”

So let’s all say that to someone close by, right now, “A Happy and Blessed New Year to You!”

However, we are also heading into a special Christian day, called Epiphany, January 6. The quick definition of Epiphany is: when the wise men came to visit Baby Jesus.

It’s a big holiday in Mexico. It’s when the children get their presents. They don’t leave cookies and milk for Santa Claus, they leave hay for the wise men’s camels. There is even a recipe for Three Kings Cake. Sorry kids, no more presents here. Santa Claus has taken care of that for you already, and Santa Claus is exhausted.

Why celebrate Epiphany though? Are the wise men all that important?

Well, you might be surprised.

I looked it up and this is what I found.

“The feast of Epiphany (January 6) is not as well known today as is Christmas, but it is older and has an even more important place in early Christian history. It was the third [holiday], after [Easter] and Pentecost, in the calendar of the early church. . . .the Christian feast of Epiphany may have begun in Egypt as early as the late second century.

The word *epiphany* means “manifestation.” In Christian use it refers particularly to the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ. Epiphany . . .had to do with the beginnings of Jesus Christ’s work of manifesting God. The . . . theme. . . is Jesus Christ manifesting God to humans.” (Handbook of the Christian Year, by Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey, and James F. White)

“We commonly use the word *epiphany* to describe a revelation or an ‘aha’ moment. The word *epiphany* has Greek origins, and it originally meant *appearance* or *manifestation*. The coming of Christ was first revealed to the Jewish world through the shepherds who heard the angelic announcement and ran to the stable to see for themselves. Through the wise men, Christ was revealed to the Gentile world. May this Epiphany season be a time of discovering or rediscovering God’s love for all of us.

Have you ever thought of the things that the wise men did not know? . . .they set out on a journey, not knowing where it would take them . . .First of all, they did not know how long the trip would be when they decided to follow the star that appeared in the East. Secondly, they did not know how they would be received in the faraway foreign land. They did not know what the king would look like; nor did they know when or if they would return home. Yet they. . .chose to make the journey.

Following the light of God is a journey of similar faith. We often feel that we don’t know where our journey will lead us, and we certainly never know what we will find along the way. We do, however, know that God goes before us, and with us, and that the journey is not in vain.” (United Methodist Church Worship Resources)

It is so interesting to me that January 6, Epiphany, comes so close to January 1, New Year’s Day, in the calendar.

They are also close in theme and meaning.

First think about the expression, “seeing the light.” It generally means that a person sees and understands something much more clearly, and can act upon it accordingly.

If we take the expression literally, we know that when we are in the dark, and we see a light, then we can see where we are going.

That is what the wise men were actually doing. They were seeing the light of the star, and following it to the place of Jesus’ birth, Bethlehem. (Well, actually they stopped in Jerusalem first, but eventually, they made it to Bethlehem.)

Now let’s think about the New Year.

It’s a good time to do new things. If you don’t believe me, take and look and listen to all the TV and radio commercials. According to them it’s a great time to: lose weight; start exercising; quit smoking, pay off debts.. And they have products to buy which will help you in these noble goals!

There is nothing wrong with getting into better physical condition. There’s nothing wrong with giving up destructive habits or conditions.

However, what I would propose for all of us is a bit different. I am not talking resolutions, not even going there! I am making a suggestion. I propose that we all look to the light of God more this year. Seek God’s guidance. Make yourself more available to God—by attending worship (you are all doing that, right now); by individual prayer and devotion; by reading the Bible. Any number of things could help us open our hearts and souls and minds to God.

I’m going to tell you what I’ve been up to in that respect. I’ve been letting myself take Bible verses seriously and personally. You might think that would be a given, for a minister, but no, I have a very bad habit of thinking that certain Scriptures don’t apply to me, just to everyone else.

Kind of like how Jean Kerr felt about airplanes and diets—wonderful things for other people to go on!

The first one that hit me was from a Billy Graham column. I don’t remember the topic. I do remember he quoted from the Bible, Matthew 16: 18b: “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” That was Jesus speaking.

That particular verse gave me some great comfort and relief. We have been experiencing some financial and attendance difficulties at this church. This weather has not helped either. Many of us have been quite concerned and worried. We are doing all we can to deal with this situation. (Including having worship in the Chapel next week, to save heating costs. Sorry.)

This verse gave me some hope. The Lord is on our side! We must not abandon our own efforts but we need not panic or despair, either. Jesus is watching out for us.

Then I had 2 other Scriptures run into each other and hit me on the head in the process. I had encountered some red tape and difficulties with a certain government. Has that ever happened to any of you? I had gotten to the really dumb and downright crazy idea that Agent So and So, the one handling the matter, was my enemy, and was doing it all on purpose, to cause me trouble, personally. And I was taking fiendish delight in that idea.

Then those verses floated into my mind:

“(Love) does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” That’s First Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 6 and 7. It’s the description of what Christian love is meant to be.

So I couldn’t get all sinfully gleeful that Agent So and So had done all this. I couldn’t even take my theory as certain truth.

The other Scripture was from Jesus again, in Matthew 5: 43-44. Maybe Matthew is the one who is out to get me? No, no, I must not go there. The Bible verse is:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I way to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’ “

Oh boy, so now I had to pray for Agent So and So. But I came up with a pretty good prayer, and I threw in the names of some other folks for it too: “God bless them all with goodness and wisdom.”

See, if they all become good and smart, they won’t bother me any more, and they will even see things my way!

Okay, those probably sounded silly and petty. They did help me.

I am convinced, though, that looking for God’s light will help you, too—in attitudes, in big and little decisions, in daily life, with family, with friends, with school, with work, with everything.

This can be for all of us, a time, a year even, of great Epiphany and discovery of God in our own lives, if we will be open to God’s guidance.

So, Happy Epiphany!

Amen.

By Rev. Sally J. DeMasters