

Sunday, January 5, 2020 – Epiphany (Observed)/2nd Sunday of Christmas
“Beyond the Familiar”

Matthew 2: 1-12

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV
Frame & Refrain

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

A little phrase caught my attention this week. I wasn't looking for it. It wasn't part of my preparation time or even during devotions. It was just there in the midst of my routine. In fact I think I was rushing through a pile of stuff just trying to get caught up in the aftermath of a bazillion services, having guests in town, time out of the office and preparation for today's Voter Meeting. But there it was and it's been stuck in my head most of the week. It's just one line and when you hear it you'll think, "Pastor Derek you need to get a life."

"The Epiphany message motivates us to go beyond that which is familiar." See what I mean. Not really that profound or spectacular – except that it can make you start to think. "Beyond that which is familiar" – what would that mean for me and my life, for you and your life, for us and our life together as a family of believers in Jesus Christ at Mountain View?

First we better make sure everybody knows what Epiphany is. The word Epiphany – means to shine forth, to reveal suddenly something that was once hidden from view and now has been made known, brought forth for all to see. It is applied to this little season right after Christmas – technically it begins tomorrow, January 6th – and it is traditionally marked by three significant moments in the life of Jesus. First, what you heard in the gospel this morning is the coming of the wise men – foreigners, people who were not part of the Jewish bloodline or faith – to bring gifts and worship a new born king. We'll talk more about them in a minute.

Second is the baptism of Jesus – which you will hear next week. The account of Jesus coming to John the Baptist and submitting to a baptism that was the opposite of ours, taking back our sin. And the third event of the season of Epiphany is the first miracle Jesus performed which is recorded in the Gospel of John – the changing of water into wine at the wedding of Cana.

Epiphany shouts at a world that has its eyes squeezed tightly shut and its hands over its ears – the baby whose birth you just celebrated at Christmas is about to turn the whole world upside down. He is for all people not just for a special group at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea.

The baby Jesus will grow up between here and next week's lessons. His baptism announces – "let the games begin." We get to know Jesus. Up from the water of baptism Jesus will be led into the wilderness to face the devil and his temptations one on one. He is a man – tempted and harassed like us in every way – except without sin.

Oh, but don't forget, he is also true God. Witness the miracle of water changed into wine. Shrug it off if you want – just another story made up to fool people into thinking that Christianity is more than just another religion, but you are here this morning for some reason. What will it hurt to consider the possibility – maybe you will have an epiphany.

And we need an epiphany dealing with the challenges of this world. In the wake of tragedies questions have arisen about where God is in all this. It's more than just events like mass shootings or 9/11... at least there you could blame the terrorists, or the disturbed mind of a flesh and blood person. But what about natural disasters? Fifteen years ago this very time of year we were just days removed from a massive tsunami that killed a quarter of a million people in southeast Asia. And people were asking questions. One columnist asked the following:

"Did the tsunami reflect the will of God? Or was God powerless to stop it?"

"If it was God's will, what moral lesson can we possibly accept from an entity for whom individual human life is evidently so expendable?"

"Why isn't constant fear the only sensible attitude toward such a being?"

"Either way, what does it mean to trust God or have faith in God when in seconds on a sunny day a crushing wave from the deep can snatch a loved one literally from your grasp and drown him?"

“Trust that it's all part of some bigger plan that mere mortals cannot begin to access or comprehend?...

“The grand mystery notion fits well enough for me...

“I call my outlook indifferent agnosticism: I don't know if God exists and I don't care. God's will and design for this temporal and spatial vastness, if any, is so patently, deliberately impenetrable that I doubt any mortal has a grasp on it.

The very inexplicability of sad events like the tsunami, like the AIDS crisis or even like the cancer death of the father of one of my daughter's 2nd-grade classmates last week are, to me, reminders to focus on our obligations to one another, not to the infinite; to honor the creator, if any, by honoring creation itself and hoping that's good enough.”

Maybe you're not that far down the road, but there's certainly enough frustration and uncertainty in the day to day drama of life in Las Vegas to make you scratch your head and wonder – why does it have to be this way and why can't we all just get along – give each other a little grace in the family, at work, on the roads, in the classroom.

I need an epiphany, Lord. I've lost my way and I don't know where to turn. Come with me.

There are two things about the account of the so-called wise men that sting me every time I hear it. First, they came to Jerusalem looking for the new born king of Jews – one they had somehow discovered perhaps while searching through some old scrolls in a box in the basement of a library in Babylon. Remember the people of Israel had been exiled and held captive in Babylon from 70 years – those were the days of Daniel in the Lion's Den and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. It's not hard to imagine the Israelites writing down and repeating over and over again the promises that God would send them a Messiah who would rescue them.

So based on some fragment of information and the appearance of new star in the heavens the wise men moved beyond what was familiar without a lot of certainty of where they would wind up or what they would find.

Folks, we have not a fragment of information, but 66 books of a well attested, reliable, historically accurate account of God's work from the creation of human beings to His unfathomable love that carried Him from heaven, to a cross, through suffering and shame, to a glorious resurrection and ascension with the promise of His return in glory to give the final and definitive answer to every question from the silly nonsense of so-called historical documentaries about the Bible you find flipping through channels on your TV to gut-wrenching numbness of tsunamis to plain old every day trauma of your life and mine.

But when they got to Jerusalem, King Herod and all Jerusalem with him were disturbed! Yes, the coming of Jesus is disturbing because it means you have to move beyond what is familiar. Herod's response? Find out where. Fake worship. His true purpose? Kill and destroy. Do you understand that this is still what Satan seeks to do to you? Stay right where you are. Don't study God's word. Don't grow and learn how to engage your faith in conversation about books and natural disasters and real life. Come here once a week, once a month, twice a year. Go through the motions of worship, call it good enough.

You wanted an epiphany? Well, epiphany moves you beyond what is familiar. It's time to engage. The world keeps moving, time marches on. It will either get better or it will get worse or it will stay the same. But you cannot stay the same.

Here's the other thing about the wise men that tickles my imagination. After they had worshiped and were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod they returned to their country by another route.

You can't come into the presence of Jesus Christ and go back the way that you came. Your sins have been forgiven! By these words the Holy Spirit of God whispers, "believe, only

believe.” And then it starts to flood in. By faith, you died with Jesus on His cross and today you are raised from the dead.

It’s time to go. It’s 2020! How many more times to tell your spouse, your children, your grandma and grandpa you love them do you have? Say, “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you” and move beyond what is familiar.

You can’t come into the presence of Jesus Christ and go back the way you came. You are forgiven. The old you is dead and buried again in this worship. Start over and then start over again and then again.

What’s true for you and me individually is true a thousand fold of us together. Forgiven, resurrected people bound together in Christ. This congregation, Mountain View Lutheran Church and School, cannot stay the same, there’s constant adjustment, alignment, change. We’ve been working on that together for nearly a year now, adopting a new Ministry Plan of your creation and now we turn our attention toward this building, to align it with that Ministry Plan to meet the ministry needs of the 20s, 30s and beyond. There is so much to be done. Herod and all Jerusalem with him were disturbed at the news of Jesus birth!

Disturb us, O Lord. Teach us, guide us, inspire us to be the beacon shining the Light into this community – forgiven, adopted into God’s family and sent on His mission to love and disciple others.

Epiphany moves us beyond that which is familiar. In Jesus’ name, amen.