



I am not sure if you knew this, but today is known as Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany falls on January 6. It is the 12th day after Christmas - the day you're supposed to get 12 drummers drumming. In more Liturgical churches, it is the day they commonly remember the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem. It happens on the first Sunday of January because as you know, the Wise Men saw the star the moment Jesus was born and then traveled for the next year arriving in Bethlehem around Jesus' first birthday and worshipped him in the house where they were living at the time (Matthew 2:11-12).

I am told that in some parts of Germany and a number of other countries, Epiphany Sunday (more specifically January 6) is a big event. Children dress up as kings and travel from door to door, much as we do on Halloween. But, instead of collecting for themselves, they collect for the poor, remembering that the Wise Men brought gifts to the poor Christ child. Isn't that a great idea? As I read about this it got me wondering if we weren't missing something. Actually, the more you look into church history, the more you realize that some great Church traditions have come and gone. Epiphany in the early church was one of the great feast days, second only to Easter in its importance. The third great feast was Pentecost, another day that we don't celebrate nearly as much as we should. The church placed it's greatest emphasis on Easter, celebrating it with an all-night vigil the night before, and then continued celebrating it with what was called the "Great 50 Days", ending with a huge blowout party on Pentecost. Easter, Epiphany, and Pentecost were the 3 largest focuses of the church. Nobody even thought about celebrating Christmas until the fourth century. So, what happened? One seminary professors used to ask, "*How come nothing epiphs on Epiphany anymore?*" Why was Epiphany so important in the past, but today has lost it's importance in much of the church?

### **I. Epiphany is about Expectations**

As I said, Epiphany focuses on the day the Wise Men came to Bethlehem and gave their gifts to baby Jesus. (Gifts which became Mary and Joseph's road money, enabling them to make their flight to Egypt so that King Herod could not kill baby Jesus). The word Epiphany means "manifestation" or "revelation". It is the idea of a huge 'Ahah'. For the Wise Men, almost on behalf of all mankind, they are the ones who come and say "Ahah! This is Jesus the one who the prophets foretold who is God come among us." That is why the Wise Men are such a focus at Epiphany, for they had an epiphany (an 'ahah') of who Jesus was. They are also celebrated because as non-Jews who traveled from afar (probably Iran or Iraq) they were the first gentiles to discover who Jesus was. So for those of us who are not of Jewish descent, this is a day when God began to open the doors of Salvation to us.

I love putting together mysteries. As we said on Christmas eve, I believe that the Wise Men were simply scholars or University professors from Iran or Iraq. Have you ever wondered how they came to discover that a World changing leader was coming to earth and was someone they needed to meet? I had this 'ahah' the other day. If you turn back the clock 550 years, before Jesus was born, you will find that Babylon marched it's armies against Jerusalem, sacked the city and took away a handful of Israelite scholars- some of their finest minds- and marched them back to Babylon as slaves. One of

those was a scholar named Daniel. Do you remember the story of Daniel and the lion's den and how Daniel ended up as a key counselor/scholar/wise man in the king's court? Do you know that he wrote in Daniel 9, of the coming of one who would put an end to sin? And Daniel probably had with him some of Isaiah's writings like Isaiah 9:6,7; 60:1-4. I wonder if the Wise Men of Jesus' time were scholars who read the musty old writings of Daniel and Isaiah which helped them find Jesus in Israel 550 years later? And then in the middle of their unearthing the Old Testament writings, a star appeared that brought them to Jerusalem. And they became the first non-Jews to meet Jesus- the coming Saviour of the world.

That is why on Epiphany Sunday many churches have celebrated the Wise Men. But as I have done some more research I found that Epiphany celebrated more than the Wise Men's arrival. It also celebrated two other things: Jesus' first miracle of changing water into wine at Cana, and the day God set aside Jesus as the Son of God at his baptism. Those three things—the Wise Men, Cana, and the Baptism were all lumped together historically by the church to celebrate the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Historically the church felt that the fact that a baby was born in a manger was relatively unimportant compared to the events that proved to the world who that baby was. For the authority of Jesus was validated by the signs he performed, like changing water into wine or the voice of God and a descending dove at his baptism, and through signs in the heavens that could be interpreted by the Gentiles. Those signs were God's way of saying, "Pssst. This is the guy!" The Epiphany, the 'ahah', was the church's way of saying "...and we can never be the same again." The early church was full of excitement and expectation. They anticipated the return of Jesus at any time. They expected the resurrected Jesus to be involved in their lives as individuals. They expected this Jesus to touch their world. It was that excitement that caused the gospel of Jesus to explode from a few disciples in an upper room, to a world changing force.

So why doesn't anything 'epiph' on Epiphany anymore? There may be several answers, but I think one of them is that for the most part, we no longer expect God to step into our lives in a personal and powerful way. We have lost some of the early church fervor which found it's basis in an Expectation that if God could break into our world in the form of baby Jesus, or could break into our world at Jesus' baptism, or at Pentecost with miraculous signs and wonders, that He could break into our world, families, businesses and church life. Our lack of expectations has hampered God's ability to break into our world like He would love to.

In the early church, the point of Epiphany was not just to remember history, but to be reminded that God appears miraculously to us in places and in ways that we don't expect. If we keep remembering that God seems to thrive on the unexpected and if we keep expecting to see God everywhere we turn, we are more apt to see it when it happens again. For example, at the wedding at Cana, a crowd was present when Jesus turned the water into great wine, but unless I am mistaken, only a few were probably aware that Jesus had worked a miracle in their midst. Why? Because while they may have realized that the wine was flowing again, most weren't paying enough attention to what was happening right in front of them. And because they weren't watching, they missed an event that happened right in front of them, that people have talked about for two thousand years. Another example comes from Bethlehem, a town

that was so full of people that Mary and Joseph couldn't even find a room to spend the night. Jesus was born under the noses of so many people, but there is no indication that more than a handful paid any notice to the new life that changed all of history, nor the bright star in the sky and the shepherd's stories.

If we want anything to 'epiph' in our lives, we had better begin by expecting it and watching for it. Anne Robertson says '... the message of Epiphany...and Easter...is that God is not dead, dried out, and stuffed into your Bibles somewhere around the book of Psalms. God is alive and kicking and epiphing here, there and everywhere in the hopes that somebody will tune in to the right frequency'. The God who dared to show himself in Jesus of Nazareth was present in your home when you woke up this morning and is somehow here in this service right now. He is as present at the funeral home as He is in the delivery room. The God that was calling to you in our last hymn is the God that will be revealed right after the service, right as you speak to your neighbour, right as you read His Word. The message of Epiphany is "Keep watch!" for you don't know the day or the hour when God will appear in His glory and in your life. The point of Epiphany is that we are called to make space in our lives to have a real encounter with God. It might be here, it might be anywhere, but expect that it will happen. So as you begin a new year, set a pattern of getting up in the morning asking for and then looking for where God will intersect in your life and go to sleep listening for God's voice to speak comfort and wisdom into your heart. And today come to communion open, expecting to receive from him. Know that God came so you could have epiphanies ('ahahs') with him. That is his dream and promise to you and me. Epiphany is about expecting to meet Jesus.

## **II. Epiphany is about Stepping Out**

It is interesting when you think about what time of year Christmas and Epiphany happens here in North America, it is during the time of the year which is the darkest. For example in Barrow Alaska, the sun sets on November 18 and doesn't rise again until January 24. For 65 days there is darkness and the sun doesn't shine. Up there the earth is tilted in such a way that for over 2 months there is no visible sunlight. But on January 24, when the sun peaks over the horizon for the first time, the entire town comes out to celebrate the light and the hope of a new year beginning. Epiphany Sunday is the beginning of a new year which leaves behind the Christmas story and begins to focus on the death and resurrection of the Son of God, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Today I want to begin a brand new series which moves us from 'Stepping It Up', which looked at how we are called to grow deeper in our relationship with Jesus, stronger in our walk with him and more passionate in how I live as a believer, to 'Stepping Out' with the good news of Jesus into our world. For once we have had an Epiphany, an 'ahah', about who Jesus is to us, it in turn must have a profound impact on how we see our life being used beyond ourselves. So I want to spend about a month on ...

- Making a difference in the lives of OUR NEIGHBOURS
- Making a difference in our COMMUNITY
- Making a difference in our CITY
- Making a difference in our WORLD

Our Mission statement as a church is *To Know Jesus* (that is Stepping it up – when it comes to my relationship with Jesus) *and Touch the World* (which is making a difference in the lives of our neighbours, community, city and world).

It is the idea is that just like when you throw a rock into a pond there are those concentric circles that flow from where the rock landed. So from your front door there should be a rippling effect of concentric circles of influence that first touch your neighbours, then your community, your city and finally have an influence on your world.

The biblical basis is simple, Acts 1:5-8. This is a cornerstone for our mission policy which Wayne Elford, Carol McCaslin, Gord Abraham (our consultant), Brad Friesen and others have worked on. Jesus spoke of when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and this is literally when you are 'Baptized' by the Holy Spirit, which means that you and I are to be immersed (held under/plunged under). The Holy Spirit's power comes when we have had an Epiphany (a revelation, an 'ahah' with Jesus). From this plunge into the Holy Spirit should come a rippling effect on those around us. You see as Jesus spoke to them He said the influence of your faith needs to first affect those in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the city in which they were living, so in other words their faith should have an effect on those with whom they are in contact on a daily basis. Our Jerusalem would be our neighbours and our co-workers. Those whom we run into or our lives intersect with on a very regular basis, those God has placed closest to us. Then He added a second ring to the circle, He said you will be my witnesses in Judea which was their province. When I think of most of our lives, the second ring of connectivity that we have would be to those in our community. As a church we are of course placed in the Brentwood community, but through you we are strategically placed in communities like Tuscany, Hawkwood, Scenic Acres, Beddington, etc. So the question we need to ask is what is our call as individuals, and as a church, in the communities that God has placed us in as people who have had Epiphanies or present day meetings with Jesus? The third circle Jesus speaks about is Samaria. In their case it was a province to the north of them, but population wise a modern parallel could be that we are called to somehow have an influence on our city. And then the final ripple affect that Jesus calls us to be involved with is the ends of the earth. Jesus is saying as world citizens, He expects us to somehow leave an impact and legacy on our world. As individuals and as a church, we need to wrestle with what that means to us at Brentview, who have been placed right here at the corner of Crowchild and the World.

Like I said, I want to spend around a month on each of these four callings which God has placed on our personal lives and our church's corporate heart. I know that some of you have a real heart for those who live right next door to you and across your back fence (your **neighbours**). I know others of you are key movers and shakers on your community board, coaches on your soccer leagues (you are having a **community** impact). I know that many of you are involved on a **city** level with care for the disadvantaged through Inn from the Cold, Jesus Loves You Society, The Pregnancy Care Counseling Center, as teachers in your local school or a Volunteer at one of the hospitals. And I know that many of you have a heart for the **world**. That is why 74 of you last year went on short term mission trips. Some of

you have helped plant Orphanages around the world while others pray weekly for missionaries or are part of a Barnabas Group that cares for a specific missionary that we help support, or through the church you were part of sending gifts to each of our missionaries over Christmas (we included Jerry's latest CD).

Please know that I would love to have emails and notes passed to me about ways God has nudged you when it comes to living out your faith with your neighbour, community, city or world wide. I would love this to be a group preach, where you help me share ideas that God has shown you and laid on your heart. Also, I know that once a month we will set aside space to showcase ministries which God has led you into and laid on your heart, so if you would like to be involved in that send me an email. And while we may not have room for everyone to do this, I think it would be encouraging for all of us to see many of the places where our church is living up to our call *To Know Jesus and Touch the world*.

The point of the next number of months is that because God has been gracious to us and we (like the Wise Men) have had an epiphany with Jesus, where somehow we had this "ahah'h" and He has entered our lives and continues to enter our lives, we in turn are called to live in such a way that others can have that same kind of meeting with Jesus. Because our lives intersect with others on 4 different levels- as neighbours, as community friends, as those who share this city with us, and those who share this world with us, our lives need to have places where they make a difference on all of these levels. And the exciting thing for me is that Acts 1:8 says that it is possible. It says '*... and you will receive the Holy Spirit and you will be my witnesses in... your neighbourhood, your community, your city and your world*'. Jesus promises that with his help this is possible. So I am excited to see how the Lord will lead us as we look at what He says is possible. The story of Wise Men being led hundreds if not thousands of miles by old manuscripts and stars in the sky, having an Epiphany with Jesus, has been given to tell us that we can expect God to not only do the impossible but that we should expect it in our lives.

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