

St James United Church



Message for January 5, 2025 Epiphany Sunday (Last Sunday of Christmas)

“The Why of the Incarnation” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft
Isaiah 60:1-5; Luke 2:41-52; and “The Magi” by Malcolm Guite

You’ve heard me say before that I don’t like Christmas, and yet despite that I still feel a bit sad each Epiphany as the Christmas season wraps up for another year. I say that because I like the season's focus on the mystery of the incarnation, on how God draws near to us profoundly, even uniquely, in the life of Jesus. In this we often consider the what of this mystery, highlighted each Christmas Eve as we ponder God’s deep love for the world in choosing to accept the fullness of our humanity. But today we instead consider the incarnation's great why and a what next.

For this we usually focus on magi paying homage to Jesus, which we recognized in the poem by Malcolm Guite, and was hinted at in our Isaiah reading. But epiphany means revelation, and so two other stories were traditionally affirmed on this day, still are in the Orthodox church - Jesus’ baptism (which we’ll look at next week) and the miracle of water turned to wine at a wedding in Cana (which would be a good choice as we share communion). But I find that the story of Jesus in the Temple at twelve years old is also an Epiphany story, fits this revealing context as people see in him someone who was wise beyond his years and so points to God working within him.

We also hear him telling off his parents, explaining how he must be about his Father’s house, that is doing his Father’s business. This suggests not only that God is with him but has a purpose for him. As we will discover looking past next week and the inauguration of his ministry after he was baptised, the why of the incarnation is summed up when he goes to the synagogue in his hometown and quotes from Isaiah that ““The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour,”” and tells his neighbours that in him those words were fulfilled (Luke 4:18-20).

As we just heard in that quotation, the business of his divine father is focused not on freeing us from death so we go to heaven one day so much as freeing us from what kills hearts, kills spirits and kills bodies right now, a freeing that David sang of in “O Holy Night,” written as an abolition anthem, a song calling for the end of the enslavement of others. That is the focus of Jesus in his ministry as he welcomes, feeds, heals and forgives, as he extends compassion to those under Rome’s boot and challenges those who put them there. In this, the scene in the Temple is quite telling. On one hand, it’s reminiscent of Samuel and so as I said before Christmas, Jesus is cast

by Luke as the prophet who'll usher in God's Reign. But it also looks back to Caesar Augustus who made his political debut when he was twelve, giving a speech at his grandmother's funeral. Like applying the titles of the emperor - Saviour, Lord of Lords - to Jesus, Luke once again sets up Jesus as the anti-emperor, or true emperor, real peace not Augustus' *Pax Romana* achieved through authoritarian control and military might but Jesus' way of compassion, justice and love.

This too is where God is revealed, not a what so much as a what next of the incarnation, God present not just in the person of Jesus but in how he embodied God's Reign in his life. And that is to be our what next too, God revealed when we're about our divine father's business. After all, the goal of the incarnation is restoring us to ourselves, reminding us how we too are made in God's image and likeness, how all of us inspired with God's breath. That awareness impacts the world as we draw on that knowledge to shape how we treat others, no matter where we are from or what we believe, an inclusive reign affirmed in gentiles, the magi, coming to honour Jesus.

But that was not a popular way of seeing things, so threatening that the next time Luke describes Jesus coming to the Temple is just before the end of his life. But like Mary and Joseph who find him after three days, we know how his death also ends, his resurrection after three days a way for God to confirm that he embodied Isaiah's prophecy rightly, that his way of freeing others is how we are all to free others. And in this we discover not just any presence of God but a God who resurrects love when hate seems to have an upper hand, a God who restores life in order to reassure us that the way of death will never have the final word.

This is a critical message for us as we enter 2025, a year bound to bring significant heartache to many if the platforms of the incoming American president and others who emulate him are implemented. I pray they won't be but Jesus reveals to us that even if they are, his way of welcome, compassion, inclusion, forgiveness, justice and love will triumph in the end. They will as long as we keep them at the centre of how we live individually, and most importantly in community as we support each other in his way. As we do, God draws near to us as surely as God did in Jesus' birth over two thousand years ago.

And so as Christmas ends, I realize I don't need to be sad after all. The mystery that we have celebrated is still revealed as we go about the business of our divine father. It's not always easy. It certainly wasn't for Jesus. But as God drew near in him, so does Jesus in us, helping us as we free one another when we extend compassion to those hurt by others and challenge those who do so, as we too reveal God's way of compassion, justice and love. Amen.