

The Sunday after Christmas was as promised more singing than preaching. Last week we celebrated Epiphany and yesterday, the Baptism of Christ.

We held in prayer: Thelma House, Ronnie House, Gerry Kelsey and the Turners and prayed that all who are missed know that we hold them in our hearts.

Among our celebrations was Betsy Graves' birthday on the 3rd and having Betty House back with us last week and this week!

Be watching later this week for the Union Church Community Survey! These are anonymous and we appreciate your prompt responses.

Sunday, Jan. 10

HEBREW SCRIPTURE Isaiah 43:1-7

EPISTLE Acts 8:14-17

GOSPEL READING Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

MESSAGE *A new direction...*

Imagine the special effects for this scripture! Howling winds opening the heavens from which comes a light so bright that the crowds are shading their eyes. And the whitest dove descending. A disembodied voice booming from those heavens: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

When the heavens opened, and the Spirit descended upon Jesus, standing there in the River Jordan, the wings of that dove must have felt like a great rustling wind blowing through.

In this season of the Christian year, everything happens so quickly. Two weeks ago we were celebrating the birth of Jesus. This past Wednesday was Epiphany, the season of manifestation, of revelation, of a bright shining light.

And today, we celebrate the Baptism of Christ. This is not the sweet sacrament of a baby in a beautiful white gown having a cross gently formed on her head by a robed pastor. Parents and godparents looking on. And family and friends smiling in the pews.

No, this was mayhem. The River Jordan is not like the sparkling blue waters of the Sea of Galilee. It is a relatively shallow and very muddy body of water. Crowds of people lined the shores listening to the rantings of John, standing in the muddy water clothed in animal skins with locusts and honey in his beard.

The wild-eyed prophet warns them of fire and winnowing as he drags them into a muddy river (ironically) to cleanse them of their sins and mark a new beginning to their lives.

Remember last week we spoke of the Wise Men following the star to find the house of the young Jesus. Having seen him, their lives were changed and they went home another way away from evil and toward the love of the child.

Although things appear to be moving very quickly, it is no accident that we hear the story of Jesus' baptism during the season of Epiphany. This story is all about who Jesus is: imagine the heavens as they open up and the voice of God speaks directly to Jesus, saying, "You are my Beloved."

Barbara Brown Taylor draws a contrast between the "ax-wielding arsonist" John says is coming and the "gentle carpenter upon whom the Holy Spirit descends." Taylor says, "Jesus goes into the waters of the Jordan a carpenter and comes out a Messiah. He is the same person, but with a new direction. His being is the same, but his doing is about to take a radical turn." Like the Wise Men, he left by another route.

Jews of Jesus' time valued hearing more than engaging the other senses. The mobs of people standing on the shores of the Jordan were waiting for the promises they heard from their grandmothers, promises that gave them hope. And it was that hope that took them to the river. These were people, including Jesus, who kept Torah, held the world stable and tried to point to the goodness of God even under the heel of one oppressor after another. The stories they heard of the rabble-raising prophet drew them to the hope of a fresh start.

Once there, they learn from the prophet, himself, that he is not the one they have been waiting, hoping for. Jesus has power. John has not.

But the crowds stay and get down into the muddy river with John, getting ready for that one who is going to sort things out and purify them of their sins. John uses water to mark this turning away from sin, this new beginning. Like Jesus, he is a good Jewish prophet who knows the traditions of his people, including the cleansing bath taken by Jews for many religious reasons and by Gentiles when they convert to Judaism,

This baptism, this cleansing did more, it set those people apart as a community for the new world.

Luke's Gospel shows that Jesus "is in line with the traditions-the faith and deep hope-of his people". Stephen Wright goes on to say that Luke also wants to make clear how Jesus is different from the prophets who came before him. Jesus is not just one more prophet in a long line of prophets." He has come to embody that 'new thing' God is about doing.

In this sense, baptism is much more than a personal, private thing between an individual and God. It's a powerful bonding experience after which nothing ever the same, for we understand that we now belong to something much greater than ourselves, this new community engaged with God in bringing a new world to reality.

Richard Swanson says that baptism "connects people with promises too big to fit into the world as it is presently constituted."

Martin Luther reminded people to "remember your baptism". I doubt that most of the beautiful babies I have baptized are going to remember their baptisms, except through pictures. Luther meant something bigger than our historical memory of one day. He wrote, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued." Martin Luther wanted us to remember each day who we are, and whose we are, and how beloved we are.

Today in churches around the world, people are still being baptized, still being washed in the living waters, still thirsting for God's grace and a word of forgiveness and life, still waiting to be included, to find their place in the story

of healing and salvation, still longing for the chance to start their life over. Like those crowds coming out to the wilderness so long ago, the voice echoes God's words from Isaiah long before, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

In this Epiphany season, there is no doubt that we will be blessed to witness the workings of God's Spirit in many and marvelous ways, from the smallest kindnesses to great healings, from stories of reconciliation and newfound faith to visions of ministry in this world that God loves. What part will we play?

Jan. 3, 2016

Open our hearts and minds to the light of Your word read and preached.

HEBREW SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 60:1-6

EPISTLE READING Ephesians 3:1-12

GOSPEL READING Matthew 2:1-12

We rejoice in the mystery made plain through the good news of the babe of Bethlehem. May this good news transform us and guide us as we seek to follow the star of life and light.

MESSAGE

Turn your eyes upon Jesus

Beth Hood

The beginning of Matthew's Gospel makes it clear: Jesus is in the heritage of Israel. Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham. Today's scripture takes a turn. Wise men from the east come to Jerusalem; they have seen his star. These wise men, astrologers, outsiders, most likely from what is now Iraq, come to the Holy City; and ask, "What can all of this mean?"

A supernova occurs when a giant star at an incomprehensible distance from the Earth explodes in a spectacular burst of light estimated to be equal in energy to 100 billion suns. By the time that light reaches us, it is an unexpected twinkle at a particular spot in the sky that would otherwise be left in darkness.

It takes a lot of patience to see something most people don't see. Bill Bryson writing about a star-watching pastor says, "There's something satisfying, I think, about the idea of light traveling for millions of years through space and just at the right moment as it reaches Earth someone looks at the right bit of sky and sees it. It just seems right that an even of that magnitude should be witnessed."

The wise men have been watching. They have come to the right place, to the place where the Scriptures are read and known and interpreted. There is wisdom for us in that story, stay close to the Scriptures when you are searching for something in life. Herod the King overhears the news about their presence and their quest, and he calls a meeting of the interpreters of the Bible. "Where is the Messiah going to be born?" In Bethlehem, is the answer, to fulfill the word of the prophet.

The Bible always offers layers of meaning, Jesus is born in Bethlehem to fulfill the Scripture. 'Bethlehem' literally means 'house of bread'-the place we are called to, the place where we will be spiritually nourished, the place where our hungers will cease. Even the outsiders are seeking something that only Jesus can provide. Jesus will later profess, "I am the bread of life...The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world".

They go to Bethlehem; they continue their search. They are wise, they have talents, and they know how to read the signs. God uses their natural gifts to come to just the place where the Messiah is born.

There they are overwhelmed with joy. Think of a time when you were overwhelmed with joy? The birth of a child, a wedding day, the achievement of a goal, a dream... incredible experiences, filled with wonder and sense that all time was standing still, that this was the only place to be in the universe!

A child is born. The wise men witness the Messiah. They have been led to just this place. They have been called for just this time and they know it. It is an epiphany, a manifestation of God; it is right before their eyes and they are overwhelmed with joy.

There is a hymn, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" in the Methodist hymnal. The words remind us to keep our eyes fixed on the place where Christ is, sometimes right before our own eyes.

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace"

The wise men have turned their eyes upon Jesus. The things of earth, including the Herods of the world, have become strangely dim. In this moment there is glory and grace and they are overwhelmed with joy.

What do we do when we are overwhelmed with joy? We respond in some way. They offer gifts. Anyone who has attended a few Christmas pageants along the way is aware of this part of the story: gold (symbolizing security and wealth), frankincense (symbolizing power), and myrrh (symbolizing death).

The Magi offer these costly, meaningful gifts. They have completed their journey. Now they go back to their lives; they go back home. But again, the Scriptures always have layers of meaning. The Magi go back a different way to avoid Herod. They now know that Jesus is a sign of God's love for the world. Herod is about hatred; Jesus is about love. So they go back a different way. Once we have met Jesus, 'looked full in his wonderful face', we go about our lives in a different way.

The epiphany of the Lord is finally a tale of transformation, and, at the beginning of a calendar year, it offers to us the possibility, once again, of our own transformation. We turn, we repent, we focus, we reflect, and we seek the face of God. We are changed; we are transformed. This wellknown story about gifts received and later shared reminds us as well that transformation is not our achievement but God's intervention, God's gift.

Meeting Jesus can change us. Maybe you were born in Jerusalem, or maybe you have been in this congregation all your life. Maybe you have come from some secular place that seems far away, or maybe God has given you some clues, some signs, and you have found yourself here now.

So, a path is set before you: focus-turn your eyes upon Jesus. Reflect and receive—you will be overwhelmed with joy. You will return to your world, and enter this New Year in a different way. Friends, let us set out for the journey!