

Epiphany, Here and There and...
A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
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Texts: Matthew 2:1-15, Genesis 28:10-16, John 1:51

My husband's parents lived in Winkler, Manitoba, so for many years we used to go there every year for Christmas. I remember one day after New Years I went to go shopping in Winkler. I went right up to the store and tried the door, but it was locked. I thought, "Is it Sunday? Have I lost track of the days? Why is this store closed?" Then I saw the handwritten sign, on a sheet of paper taped to one of the windows. "Closed for Epiphany"

Wow! You don't see that very often. Closed for epiphany! Maybe they were closed for the Christian holiday of Epiphany. But what if they were closed because they were having an epiphany?

Epiphany with a capital "E" is the name of the Christian holiday celebrating the arrival of the wise men at the birth of Jesus. Epiphany with a small "e" is a word meaning a revelation from God, an encounter with God, or an insight. An epiphany means that you have seen the light. Today we are talking about Epiphany, with a capital E and a small e.

As a preacher, there are lots of different methods of interpreting scripture to choose from. Last time I preached, I looked at the context of the writer of the gospel of Luke, and how knowing that context gives us insight into the story. Today I am taking a very different approach. As Christians, we read all of scripture. What happens when you juxtapose two biblical stories from different times and places? When you hold these different stories from the bible together, what new insights do you get? This is a very common way of interpreting scripture in some of the larger church traditions, who have a set pattern of reading two Old Testament and two New Testament readings each Sunday (called the Lectionary).

We aren't using the actual Lectionary today, but the idea behind it. The stories I have chosen for today are the story of the magi meeting Jesus, and the story of Jacob and the heavenly ladder.

I chose these two stories because they are both about epiphany, meeting God, or receiving a revelation from God. We'll use these two stories as a springboard to think about epiphany in our own lives. Will 2016 be a year of epiphanies for us?

It's not hard to find stories of epiphany in the Bible, as meeting God is the basic topic of all scripture. But one of the most famous epiphanies in the Hebrew Bible is this story about Jacob's ladder from Genesis.

Jacob has a dream where he sees a ladder of angels, descending and ascending from heaven. But the angels aren't the main show, the main thing that happens with the ladder is that Jacob suddenly realizes that the Lord is standing right beside him! God gives Jacob the amazing message that God will stay with him, and bless him, and bring him back to the land that he is leaving. All the families of the earth will be blessed through Jacob!

This is an amazing epiphany. What I find most surprising about this epiphany is that Jacob has done absolutely nothing to deserve it. In fact, if you were voting for the biblical yearbook, Jacob would probably be voted "Least likely to ever receive an epiphany". He is a liar and a cheater; lying to his father, cheating his brother out of his inheritance and his blessing. And now he is running for his life because his brother wants to kill him. Jacob, as far as we know, has never shown any interest in God. When he has talked to his father Isaac about God, it's only as "your God".

And yet, surprisingly, Jacob receives this epiphany where he meets God and receives a message. When the dream is over, Jacob wakes up. He went to sleep thinking this was just an ordinary everyday place to spend the night, and he woke up realizing that God was close, God was closer than he could possibly have imagined. He says to himself, "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it." He names the place "Beth-El" ...*Beth* meaning house in Hebrew, and *El* meaning God: the house of God.

A final significant part of Jacob's epiphany is that he shared the epiphany. He didn't keep it to himself. There are no other characters in the story at the time to hear his epiphany, but at some point he tells his family and friends what happened to him that day at Beth-El. The story eventually gets written down, and included in our scriptures. As readers, we become part of all the nations of the earth who are blessed by that epiphany. We read this story, and think about a God who is always revealing, a God who is always appearing, even when we don't deserve it, even when we don't expect it.

The image of Jacob dreaming about a ladder reaching to heaven is one of the most illustrated stories in the Bible. If this church was a church built in medieval or renaissance times, chances are if you looked up right now, you would see the story of Jacob and the ladder of angels depicted in a painting or a mosaic in one of the corners of our church. Why is this story depicted in thousands of churches? We want churches to be Beth-El, the house of God, places where people come to meet God. The story of Jacob and the ladder of angels is a reminder that God wants to meet us, God gives us epiphanies. Churches are where we reflect on this together.

Let's turn now from the story of epiphany at Beth-El, to a story of epiphany at Bethlehem. *Beth*—means house, and *lehem* means bread. We go from the house of God to the house of bread. This should give us something to chew on! How are these two stories similar, how are they different?

They're similar because both Jacob and the magi receive a gift from God. Jacob receives a dream, and the magi are given the sign of a star as well as insight into what the star means. And they both, as far as we know, did nothing to deserve the epiphany. The word "magi" can be translated as "wise men" or "stargazers," people who look for signs in the stars. The Hebrew Bible explicitly rejects and even forbids the Israelites from looking at the stars for signs. Other religions looked for signs in the stars, but not the Jewish people. So it is very curious and surprising that God would choose stargazers as the receivers of news of the newborn king.

So both stories have people who receive an epiphany as a gift from God, people who you might not think should receive an epiphany. But something that seems different about these two stories, is that the epiphany the magi receive is only partial. They see the star, and they know what it's about, but then they have to do something about that epiphany. It's a multi-staged epiphany. The star was a sign, it pointed to something. If the magi wanted to find out what that something was, they needed to buy camels, prepare gifts, and undertake a long and expensive and no doubt dangerous journey. It was a journey entirely filled with unknowns, because they really didn't know where they were going and what they would find at the end.

Another way the two stories are different is that the story of the magi has way more characters in it. The magi meet many people. They aren't on a secret mission, they share their epiphany freely with Herod and the scribes and the chief priests. So they all receive an epiphany too, they are told about the star and what it means. What is their reaction to the epiphany?

You would think the scribes and chief priests would be excited hearing of the birth of a newborn king. Could this be the messiah they have been waiting for? But, surprisingly, they don't go to Bethlehem to see this newborn king for themselves. Now Bethlehem is not

that far from Jerusalem. I stayed in Bethlehem a few years ago, and from the backyard of the home where we were staying, we could see far in the distance the walls of the old city of Jerusalem. It's about fifteen miles away. The wise men undoubtedly travelled hundreds of miles to explore their epiphany, but the scribes don't take this one day journey to see the newborn king. Why? Maybe they were thinking, "We've been waiting for the messiah for centuries, why should it happen now in this ordinary, everyday time? What are the chances of something spectacular like the messiah coming, happening on our watch? Not likely!" Maybe that's why they disregard the story of the magi, and go back to their books.

We don't know exactly why the scribes or chief priests don't accompany the wise men to see the Messiah. But the story does tell us one thing that might be a clue. The text tells us that the scribes were afraid, and all Jerusalem with them.

What were they afraid of? They were afraid of Herod, and the Roman power behind him, who had zero interest, or in fact a very negative interest in anyone claiming to be a new king. If you are talking newborn king, you are talking insurrection against Rome. Showing interest in a newborn king might get you killed. So maybe the scribes were just as happy to stay put, thank you very much. This epiphany would have cost them too much, so they don't follow through with it.

And Herod? He accepts the epiphany as true, and tries to squelch it before it gets any farther. He takes the epiphany seriously, and follows through on it in his role as a Roman ruler. He sends soldiers, whose murdering presence forever changes the lives of the families in Bethlehem.

And so though many received the epiphany, only the magi end up worshipping Jesus in Bethlehem. I think that the stable must have been a surprise for them. Their first instinct had been to go the capital city, to the temple, to the palace looking for the king. But it was in an everyday ordinary place that they found the son of God.

Sort of like Jacob waking up from his dream, and looking around his ordinary everyday camping spot, and thinking "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it." Beth-El can be anywhere! Immanuel, God with us!

Jesus himself takes Jacob's epiphany story to heart. When he calls the disciples (John 1) he told Nathanael, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." (John 1:51) Immanuel, God with us, God standing right beside us.

I just want to mention two other people who are affected by the epiphany in the story of the magi, even though they don't have a speaking role. Mary and Joseph receive the visit of the magi. We aren't told their reaction. How did this visit of the magi confirm the dreams that they themselves had had about Jesus? How did the gifts they received, equip Mary & Joseph to flee to Egypt?

The story of Jacob's ladder, and the story of the magi, are two very different stories of epiphany, from very different parts of the Bible. But they both teach us that epiphanies are gifts. And in some epiphanies there is choice involved. You can choose to do the work of unpacking the epiphany. You can take the journey it calls you to. And you have a choice whether to share it. Or you can choose to walk by the revelation, you can refuse to believe it's happening in your ordinary, everyday time.

I wonder if you can think of times where you have received an epiphany from God. The stories we have in scripture are exceptional stories; our epiphanies may be more humble, but they are epiphanies nonetheless. Moments where the light goes on, where we feel we have encountered something holy, we feel we have received a message from God.

This morning I want to share a couple of experiences I've had with epiphanies. I hope you will share some of your stories with me! When I was a young woman, like many other young people who have a relationship with God, I spent quite a bit of time trying to

figure out what direction God wanted me to take. Should I enter a social work program, or should I enroll in further studies in theology? I prayed and prayed, and I got...nothing. They both seemed viable, I would enjoy them both. I talked to people about it, I prayed about it. I wanted a confirmation in my heart that I was on the road that God wanted me to take. And that confirmation just wasn't there. I applied to the school of social work and after a couple of months I found out I didn't get into the program. So maybe that was a sign. But that didn't feel like a sign to me. It just felt like rejection. I wanted a positive sign that studying theology was what I was called to do.

I enrolled in Toronto School of Theology, and I studied for a year. It was interesting and enjoyable, yes, but I still wasn't sure. Was this what I was supposed to be doing? Just because I enjoyed something did this mean that I was on the road God wanted? And then in my second year of studies, something happened. I remember it very clearly, I was in class, and I asked a question to one of my professors, a question about direction. And she gave me an answer that went straight to my heart. It was exactly the answer, I had been looking for. And a few months later I realized that ever since that moment when she said that to me, I had not seriously considered any other path. I had turned a corner. I knew then I was headed for doctoral studies in theology, and that was where God wanted me to be. It was an epiphany. I had prayed for it, and longed for that epiphany, but I had to travel a good long way along the road before that insight came.

I want to tell you about another epiphany that happened much earlier in my life, and in a much different way. It happened when I was in grade 12, and it happened in the space of one hour, one evening just before Christmas.

I was a part of a youth group at my church, and we thought it would be cool if we went out caroling. There was a group of around ten of us. So we're all sitting around at our youth meeting, deciding where we were going to go caroling. We thought of the names of a couple of seniors in our church. There was one guy named Ed in our youth group who was really quiet, but also sort of a clown, he mostly made us laugh. And he surprised us by saying, "I know two women we could visit. They don't go to our church, but I know they'd like to hear some singing." So we added them, as the last people on the list.

We went and did our caroling, stopping to sing and drop off a plate of cookies at various homes, and then we got to the last house, the house of the two women Ed had told us about. Their home was a tiny house set far back from the street. We headed up the little walk, with snow piled high on either side. Ed knocked on the door, and after quite a long pause, there were two women at the door. These were the two thinnest women I had ever seen in my life, they were impossibly thin! And impossibly old, as far as I could tell. They were so happy to see Ed, and they immediately invited us in, and we sang for them, and gave them cookies, and then they insisted that we stay for a cup of hot chocolate, and have some of the cookies that we had brought.

Now I was all eyes, and I could see that these women were very, very frail people, they were tottering around. Ed seemed very at home here, he told them he would make the hot chocolate for us all, that they should sit down and visit. While he was in the kitchen, they started talking about Ed. About how two years ago they had advertised in the newspaper for someone to shovel their sidewalk, and Ed had answered the ad. How helpful he was, not just with the snow, but in many ways around their house. Helping them with this and helping them with that. . They were two unmarried sisters who had always lived together and they had no living relatives. Ed had come as a gift into their lives just when they needed him most. They said, "We would not be in this house right now if it wasn't for Ed."

As I listened to this story, my eyes got wider and wider. This was Ed, we were talking about. Ordinary, everyday Ed, who was always joking around. And yet ordinary everyday Ed had of his own freewill been coming here for years, helping these two

impossibly thin women, being a blessing from God in their lives. When Ed came back into the room with a tray of mugs of hot chocolate, I almost didn't recognize him. I suddenly saw Ed in a new light.

The epiphany that happened that night was about Ed, but it was also about me. That's the funny thing about epiphanies. They work on you. As I thought about it I realized that all the years Ed had been helping these women, I had been sitting at home watching Charlie's Angels on TV, or reruns of Gilligan's Island. Ed was making a real difference, while I had just been lalala-ing through the years. He was a gift in their life. I started to wonder, how is God calling me to be a gift in someone's life?

There are different types of epiphanies. Some epiphanies happen slowly and require some work, some epiphanies happen in a moment. They are all gifts from God. Suddenly your eyes are opened to the work of God in your life.

This is the first Sunday of the year 2016, and I am praying for epiphany. I am praying for it for each of you, and I am praying for epiphany for our community. Maybe the epiphany is something that will happen in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, when suddenly in the ordinary, everyday messiness of life, God provides illumination and insight. Or maybe epiphany will come in the form of a nudge, a sign, a star, pointing you to a journey. Something you must do, a road you must walk, in order to see what God has to say to you.

It's easy to be like the scribes, who received an epiphany from the magi. Maybe like them you've given up that God is going to appear in any big way in your life. You've had this certain relationship with God for a certain amount of time, and you pretty well know what to expect. So there's no point in hoping for more. Or maybe you feel a nudge towards a journey, say a trip to visit someone you've been estranged from, or to volunteer in a new place, a place that takes you out of your comfort zone. Like the scribes, you might think it's not worth the risk. Or maybe, like the magi, you go out and buy a camel and start packing your bags!

It's tempting to just wait for God to do all the work. Sometimes it happens that way. Jacob received a dream, Paul had his road to Damascus experience, dramatic, sudden things can happen. But epiphanies can just as easily be a call to get up and go.

Finally, I hope that 2016 can be a year where we share our epiphanies. Epiphanies are gifts, gifts that we can keep to ourselves and which end with us, or they can be gifts that keep on giving. When you think back on your life, have you had something you would call an epiphany? If you have, have you shared it? I think sometimes we are afraid to share our epiphanies. We think people won't believe us, we think that people will judge us, or maybe be jealous of us if we share something dramatic that happened. Mennonites have stressed being humble, and talking about a spiritual gift like an epiphany can sometimes make us feel uncomfortable. But epiphanies are meant to be shared.

My mother shared an epiphany she had with me, although she didn't use the word epiphany when she told me about it. The experience she had happened in 1982, although she only shared it with me twenty years later. My dad had died in 1977, and it was a very hard death for my mother, and she became really paralyzed with grief for many years. It was around five years after his death that it happened. She was sitting in her apartment one evening, just an ordinary everyday evening, when a being of light appeared in front of her. Light was streaming out from this being and it filled her whole apartment with light. And she could feel the light penetrating her, right to her deepest core. And the being said, "It's time to stop grieving, your grieving is over now." And then the light and the being faded away. And she told me, "And from that moment on, my grief was gone, I felt like I could move on with my life."

I was amazed by this story, I was moved by this story. And yet, and yet, like the story of Jacob, I would probably have voted my mother as one of the people least likely to receive an epiphany. While she had many fine attributes, she was a difficult person to get along with. And she was not a religious person, she had gotten baptized as a young woman, but most of her life she didn't have anything to do with church. But by the grace of God, she received a message that changed her life.

When she was dying, and I was sitting by her bed, she was unconscious, but I was talking to her. And I reminded her of that story, about that being of light, and how wonderful that experience had been for her. I told her that I thought that was what death was going to be like for her, that she was going to meet that same being of light, and that it was not something she had to be afraid of, but something she could look forward to. I was and am so thankful she had shared that story with me.

Knowing about my mother's epiphany has made me eager to ask other people about their experiences. I see that as evangelism...not in the sense of me giving something to someone who has nothing, but asking about amazing or unexplained things that have happened in their life. Maybe they have a story inside them that they've held for 30 years. All they need is an invitation to share it.

I hope that 2016 will be a year where our church and all of us are "Open for Epiphany". A year of looking for signs, following signs, expecting to meet God. And I hope that 2016 will be a year where as a congregation we share our epiphanies with each other, and rejoice together in the goodness of Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, right here, right now, in the middle of our ordinary, everyday lives.