

I pray therefore that you may not lose heart
Ephesians 3:1-12

What's epiphany, anyway? The word means "revealing" and it has to do with the revealing of Jesus, but to whom? Well, foreigners. You see, if we remember the story of the kings, or wise men or magi or astrologers, more about that later, the point is, they were from off. They were not of the religion or the culture of Jesus' family, Jesus' faith. In other words, Jesus' meaning cannot be contained by geography, ethnicity, or religion. Jesus is revealed as the savior of all humanity.

Now, we squish together the story of Christmas and Epiphany, but the Bible is clear that the magi came later. Mary and Joseph are now in a house, and Herod, wants all children under two destroyed. But no matter; tradition says the magi arrived 12 days after Christmas.

Yet, that being said, Epiphany is sort of a minor-league holiday. Children do not lie away at night waiting for Epiphany. There are no Epiphany presents, no pre or post epiphany sales, nary an epiphany tree, no real epiphany songs, except maybe for "We Three Kings," a song parodied as often as sung. . . . When I was a child it went: "we three kings of the orient are, trying to smoke a rubber cigar. It was loaded, it exploded, now we are on yonder star."

The hymn presents many problems, come to think of it. For us the Orient is Japan or China, but it really means, east. And, let's see. The Bible never says there are three, and the Bible never says they are kings. Well, so what?

Well, if we're not careful, we misunderstand the meaning of these foreign travelers who came to visit Jesus

with their wondrous gifts. We are impressed by their importance. They were people of note. The Greek word is magi, from which our term magician results, but in those days it implied great learning or science. Many have speculated that these folks were astrologers, since astrology was popular in the east, there in what was Babylon. Except in our Bible translations, magi is never translated as kings. But in any case, these people were given to understand that in Jesus' birth, God has acted decisively, God has entered into history in a new and mighty way.

Now, sometimes we contrast shepherds with magi, and say, look, Jesus is worshiped both by common people, shepherds, and royalty, the kings or magi or whatever they were. But I think there is a deeper point at work: Jesus is worshiped not just by folks like him, the shepherds, but also from folks completely different: folks from different nation, culture, and faith.

Which in the early church led to tension. Is Jesus just for us or for all? Jesus himself says he is sent first to his own people, though to be sure he certainly reached across religious lines as he reached out both to Romans and Samaritans.

But the early church at the very beginning saw its mission confined to the Jewish faith. On the Day of Pentecost, even when the message is Jesus is understood by people from many different places and languages, yet they are all Jewish.

And into this state of affairs comes St. Paul. He is a leader in two decisive areas for the Christian faith. 1) Ministry to Gentiles. In Greek, the word is ethnos, from which we get our word ethnic. But it refers, in Paul's time, to outsiders, to those outside the Jewish faith and culture.

And at the time, there were some people who did not like it one bit that Paul was offering Christ to outsiders. It was a debate that raged within the early church. In fact, the church almost split over the issue. It was Paul who made sure that Gentiles would be included.

He writes to Ephesus to say that he has been commissioned by God himself to share the good news with Gentiles. He also makes note that he is in prison, in chains, for the sake of this commission. Faith cost Paul a lot, but he was willing to pay the price.

And Paul in a sense rewrites the entire history of Israel. Most interpreted the history to say that the nation Israel would be supreme. God was doing what God was doing for the sake of His chosen people. But now Paul says, these spiritual riches were for all people.

He assures the Gentiles: you have been grafted on to God's purposes, which are revealed not in the customs and law of Israel, but in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the final, ultimate, revealing of God's grace and God's purposes.

This is Paul's understanding, he says, of the mystery of Christ. And folks, it is in this mystery that you and I live. We take it for granted that Jesus is for people like us, and that's really all because of St. Paul. The boundless riches of Christ belong even to us.

But folks, on this Epiphany Sunday, there is another great truth that defines who we are as Christian people. Folks, we are a missionary religion. And again, much of this is because of St. Paul.

Now, we all know that Jesus' last words to his disciples in Matthew were to go into all the world, making

disciples of all. Just one problem: the gospels were not written down until after Paul had written his letters. And even if the early church knew these words of Jesus, the early church was not living these words.

If you think about it, the Jewish faith was not a missionary religion. In the entire Old Testament, we never see missionaries being sent out to convert other people. The one exception is Jonah, who was sent to Israel's enemies and he didn't like it one bit.

No the Jewish faith said: we will live as faithful witnesses, that in the truth of our living, others might come to understand the truth of our God. Even in Jesus' day, this was how it was. Non-Jews were welcome to sit in at the synagogues, listen to the truth, but no one went into their communities trying to make converts. John the Baptist is another case in point. He proclaimed God's kingdom, but he did so out in the wilderness; if you wanted to know more, you had to go where John was; he didn't go to where you were.

Jesus, of course, was a missionary. He traveled ceaselessly, in Jewish and Gentile places alike, to women and children and men and synagogue rulers and Roman soldiers.

And as the early church tried to figure it all out, Paul settled the issue. The purpose of the church is indeed to go into all the world, telling all, Jew and Gentile alike, about the truth of Jesus Christ.

And folks, as we begin a new decade, 2010, this is the truth in which we live today. You know in the old days, the United Methodist Women were known as the missionary society. A good term, reminding us of our responsibilities, but in fact, every group is called to be a missionary society; every Christian is called to be a missionary.

Now don't get me wrong. When we think of missionary, we often think of foreign countries, of special people going to the jungles of Africa and the villages nestled beside mysterious rivers in South America. And indeed these missions are important. Whenever anyone asks me why the Methodists worry so much about foreign countries, the answer is simple: Jesus commands us to.

But folks, our most important mission field is right outside these doors. Beaufort, North Carolina. There are folks all around us who are hurting, who are in need. Folks for whom the transforming love of Jesus Christ will be decisive.

And you and I are called to be missionaries to them. Now, American Christian culture would say that we must be evangelists first. We must tell and tell and tell about salvation if Jesus Christ. The problem is that evangelism needs a context. And that context is the sharing of Jesus' love through our caring. The truth of Scripture is not self-evident for non-Christians, else they would be Christian already. And few folks get argued or debated into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

So perhaps we need to refocus ourselves as Christians in America and in Beaufort, and refocus on mission. Mission and evangelism are closely related, but mission implies something more than telling the good news, it implies genuinely caring for the folks to whom we are in mission; it implies offering ourselves to others to help their lives be better.

When non-church folks come for help from the PDF, I offer them help first, then and only then ask about their faith-journey. When caring and love come first, then evangelism has a context: I expect most folks followed Jesus more for his love for them than for his preaching. And history shows the early church grew not just

through the preaching of Paul and Peter and others, but through the new communities of compassion and caring formed in response to Jesus Christ.

And let's face it. There are many folks who are not nice folks in our community. Some smell of alcohol and tobacco. Others regard welfare as a way of life. And there are other folks with different values who have living arrangements of which we disapprove. These are our Gentiles, if you will. Our outsiders. And about all outsiders, Paul wrote: the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Our church vision statement is not: preaching the word of Christ;

it is sharing the love of Christ. And sharing implies mission. From soup luncheons to UMYF to Logos to handyman ministry to Sunday School, we are called to be in mission. To those outside these walls. To those outside a relationship with Jesus Christ.

But to reach out in mission. . . This is our calling from Christ. It can be difficult. Let us indeed not lose heart in our efforts. Sometimes our efforts are not successful. Sometimes, as in Paul's case, they can land us in trouble. . . fortunately for us, not in jail any more. But let us keep at it. . . not lose heart in fulfilling our calling.

Epiphany means "revealing." May epiphany be not just some obscure holiday hiding in the shadow of Christmas, but rather a clear vision of whom we are called to be: that in our witness, our caring, our deeds, and our words, we reveal to our community, our mission field, the best news of all: that Jesus is indeed for them, even as he is even for us. Amen.