

Welcome

Last Sunday, Christians around the world celebrated the Epiphany¹--the moment a small group of eastern magi saw the star of Jesus rising and somehow knew the prophesied King had arrived. So they followed that star west to Judea. This morning, I imagine those same magi just setting off after a long week preparing for the journey ahead. They've had some time to think, and consider. Scripture tells us they did not know who the baby was, or where to look when they got there,² but they knew they had to follow that star.

Two thousand years later, we still follow that star. Two thousand years and counting of a faith and a legacy built on love, justice, grace and inclusion. I wonder if those wise magi of old could have pictured us today at St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Madrid, Iowa, worshipping that same small child, continuing the good work he began.

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome to join us in that work here.

Please rise as you are able for the Call to Worship.

¹ Matthew 2:1-12

² id.

Sermon

Does anyone else sometimes get the feeling that we really have no idea what we're doing? That we're just sort of feeling our way along? Like we're here, in these adult bodies, but somewhere along the way we lost all the answers we used to have, and suddenly being an adult has gotten really hard?

It's the year 2021, and nobody knows how to do church anymore. This church has chosen to meet in person, but there were still no handshakes or hugs during the Peace. We can't see each others' faces behind these masks. We can't even sing, because singing is a superspreader event.

You've just lost your pastor, Mary Beth. Ten good years of doing God's work together, but now she's taken a new call in a new time zone, and you--we--are left to wonder what is next.

There is no instruction manual for this. Just like there's no instruction manual for climate change, or presidential transitions, or financial trouble, or social unrest. There's no instruction manual for parenting in the age of COVID, or surviving unemployment, or coping with sickness and death. God did not send us an angel this time, or a pillar of fire, or a burning bush. This time, we're on our own.

“Did you receive the Holy Spirit?” Paul asks the Ephesians. “We didn't know there was a Holy Spirit,” they replied.³

You see, Paul and the Ephesians had no instruction manual to guide them either. The people of the first-century Christian Church didn't grow up with Sunday School or Confirmation or two thousand years of Christian history and theology and culture. They didn't know what was

³ From this week's lectionary, Acts 19:1-7

supposed to happen at baptism. They didn't have Christian Bibles⁴ or blogs or professional pastors. There's not one mention in the entire Book of Acts of Carl Duling sending out an email blast with the week's announcements. Not a single verse about the Ephesians' Facebook page, or livestream, or Zoom.

“We didn't know there was a Holy Spirit,” they replied, and I believe them.

So what do you do when the Spirit doesn't come?

I'm going to stray from our lectionary and turn for a moment to the Gospel of John, to what you will all soon discover is my favorite piece of scripture. This is how I want to introduce myself to you—the way other people would share a favorite book or color or movie.

To set the scene: it is the Last Supper. Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet and broken bread with them. He foretells his betrayal, and sends Judas out into the night. Then he turns to the rest of the disciples, and among other things says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”⁵ This echoes what Jesus identifies as the “Greatest Commandment” elsewhere in scripture--love God, love your neighbor; all the law and all the prophets hang on these.⁶ Then, after a bit more talking, Jesus says:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you a new advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.⁷

⁴ The *Hebrew Bible* (sometimes called the “Old Testament”) was likely read in portions at the synagogue, but it was unlikely any Ephesian had a reference copy at home to work from. The “New Testament” was not collected and canonized as such until the Council of Rome (382 CE) at the earliest--more than three centuries after the moment the above passage describes.

⁵ John 13:34-35

⁶ Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28, 6:27-36

⁷ John 14:15-17

Jesus repeats this idea in slightly different words, and goes on to say:

the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.⁸

The chapter ends with the words, “Rise, let us be on our way.”⁹

I am a chaplain intern at a hospital just up the road in Ames. I visit patients. I talk to them about their lives, their families, their health, their pets, sometimes their death. And sometimes they ask me these questions: *Am I a good person? Will I go to Heaven? Why are my prayers not answered? Where is God?*

It has been a struggle for me not to have a “right” answer in these moments. There’s no theological bandaid I can put on the spiritual wounds of death and dying. There’s no verse I can point to that will cover every patient’s situation. When I start to fret, and my supervisor sees me searching for the perfect verse so I can go back next time and get it right, he likes to remind me, “when you walk into that patient’s room, everything you need is already with you.” Sometimes he repeats this again and again until it sinks in. “Everything you need is already with you.”

He’s not talking about the devotional apps on my cell phone. He’s not talking about the holy texts I carry or the verses I have memorized. He’s talking about God. The Spirit. He’s talking about the act of listening deeply not only to the situation in front of me, but also to that still, small voice within that reminds me things are going to be okay. Love God. Love your neighbor. The Spirit abides in you. Rise, let us be on our way.

I think this lesson transfers to a lot of life. We cannot worship the way we used to worship. *Love God--it will be okay.* We cannot hug our neighbor or hold their babies or break bread in each others’ homes. *Love them anyway—it will be okay.* Our pastor is gone after ten good years together. *The Spirit abides in you.* Life does not come with an instruction manual. *Listen to the words of Jesus:*

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.¹⁰

⁸ verse 26

⁹ verse 31b

¹⁰ verse 18

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.¹¹

Rise, let us be on our way.¹²

Next week, we're going to take this theme a step further. We're going to talk about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s collection of sermons, *Strength to Love*. We're going to talk about the relationship of love to the Holy Spirit. How one leads to the other leads straight back to the one. How Dr. King found the strength to follow Jesus' command to love his neighbor, even when that neighbor did not love him back. For now, though, it is enough to remember that as we follow that shining 2000-year-old Epiphany Star into the year 2021, love endures, the Spirit is with us, and St. Paul's United Church of Christ, we can do this together.

Amen.

¹¹ verse 27

¹² verse 31b