

Sermon for January 6, 2008

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Rev. Jerry Hancock

"Surprised by God"

Welcome to church on this Epiphany Sunday. To celebrate Epiphany Sunday is to honor one of the great traditions of the Christian Church: the arrival the Magi in Bethlehem. This familiar story covers a lot of ground, both geographically and theologically. The Magi—learned men and, in some traditions, women who were somewhere between astrologers and royalty—come from the East following the star. They stop to see King Herod and his chief priests and scribes to ask where, exactly, they could find the King of the Jews, and Herod sends them to Bethlehem. When they arrive, they are moved to bow before the child in the manger and present him with precious gifts. They are warned by an angel that Herod is not to be trusted and return to their homeland by another way.

This morning I want to focus on the end of the story. The magi, powerful people in their own right, bow before this foreign infant living in abject poverty. This recognition of Jesus as the human embodiment of God's power—this surprising recognition—is the moment of epiphany.

This first epiphany has given rise to a wider meaning of the word. To "have an epiphany" is to experience a sudden recognition. For us a Christians it means to be surprised by God.

But in that first moment with the fully human God, the Magi recognize the true power of Jesus as opposed to the corrupt power of Herod. They act on this new understanding and defy Herod, returning to their homeland by another way.

One way of preaching a Gospel story is to do as Eldonna did last week and ask with which character you identify. In this morning's story, I see myself first with the chief priest and scribes. They were the legal experts in Herods's court. They knew the law of the prophets, and based on that law, they knew that Jesus would be in Bethlehem.

I see myself in that role because that was what I used to do. I was a lawyer in a position of power. But I have had an epiphany. Like the

Magi, I have been surprised by God.

Just before Christmas, I was asked to give a brief reflection at the Christmas Vigil of the Parents of Murdered Children. It was on a Sunday afternoon at Meriter Hospital. The plan was for me to say a few words, and then the parents would come forward, say the name of their murdered child and light a candle in his or her memory.

I accepted the invitation, but as the time got closer I began to be almost overcome with anxiety. Part of my concern, of course, was what to say to these wonderful people who had experienced such a devastating loss. But I was more concerned about who might be there.

Thirty years ago, when I was serving as the Deputy District Attorney for Dane County, I prosecuted a murder case. Two young white guys from Ft. Atkinson had come to Madison to buy a mattress at “Crazy TV Lenny’s.” After they bought the mattress, they stopped to get something to eat at the McDonald’s on South Park Street. As they were ordering, a young black man entered the restaurant. For some reason, he was carrying a 24-inch bow hunting arrow that had three razor sharp points on the end. He was using the arrow as a swagger stick or some kind of symbol of authority.

Words were exchanged with the two guys from Ft Atkinson. The “N word” may or may not have been used, and there was a fight. During the fight, the young black man, whose name was Romando Seymour, stabbed one of the white men in the back with the arrow. The three pronged blade of the arrow went through his back into his heart, and he died instantly.

Romando Seymour fled the scene but was soon apprehended and charged with murder. The case was assigned to me for prosecution.

It was a big, high profile murder case—“The McDonald stabbing”—and as a young lawyer I was excited to be the prosecutor. The facts were really not in dispute. There was not a lot of usable evidence because the well-trained McDonald’s crew had cleaned up the murder scene like it had been a spilled milkshake. But here were plenty of witnesses.

As things developed, the key issue in the case was whether or not the “N word” had been used. Romando Seymour was a young kid; I think he was just 17 at the time. His lawyer, the infamous Don Eisenberg, argued that Romando had become enraged and during the fight had stabbed the

guy from Ft. Atkinson in the heat of passion, that he had never intended to kill him. As the case developed, that version of the story began to make more sense and Romando Seymour was eventually convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to eight years in prison. All in all, from the standpoint of the criminal justice system, I think that was about the right result.

It was this case that caused me to worry about going to the Parents of Murdered Children vigil, because thirty years ago in prosecuting Romando Seymour, I never gave a moments thought to how the victim's parents might have felt about the death of their son. As proof of that, after nearly thirty years, I can still instantly recall the name of Romando Seymour, but his victim is just "that guy from Ft Atkinson" who was buying a mattress at TV Lenny's.

I realized how terribly cruel I had been to that family thirty years ago. And I worried that they might be at the vigil. What could I possibly say after all these years? In the end, they were not there, so I have had some time to think about what I might have said. I might have told them that I have had an epiphany.

I now realize that the criminal justice system is all about creating and enforcing divisions. It is designed to do one thing: to separate the legally guilty from the legally innocent. It is not designed to heal. It is not designed to reconcile. It is not designed to explain. The criminal justice system could not explain how a 20-year old white kid from Ft. Atkinson and a 17-year old black kid from Madison came together at McDonalds, with the result that one goes to prison and the other ends up dead and thought to be a racist. Neither one of those kids would be recognized by their mothers.

My epiphany has led me to realize how wrong I was in ignoring their pain. My epiphany has led me away from the courthouse to ministry. My epiphany has led me to restorative justice, a process that, for me, must occur outside the divisiveness of the criminal justice system. It is a way of voluntarily allowing victims and criminals to tell their stories to each other. When it works best, both victims and offenders can find healing.

When I was a lawyer, I thought and I believed that power was in the courthouse. Now, like the Magi, I understand that the very dynamics of

power have changed, and I have gone a different way. Like the Magi, I have seen the light. I have been surprised by God.

That brings us back to the Prophet Isaiah: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

On this Epiphany Sunday and in this New Year, as individuals and as a church, we need to be open to the surprising places that God’s light will shine:

If the magi are any indication God’s light is more likely to shine in the soup kitchen at Luke House than in the Capitol.

It is more likely to shine at the Salvation Army Homeless Shelter than at the Courthouse.

It is more likely to shine in a quiet moment between parent and child than in the noise at Camp Randall.

God’s promise is that the light is there for all of us. But you and I must see, with eyes of faith, what God is showing us in a New Light. That is the challenge of Epiphany. That is the surprise.

Like the Magi, God’s light leads us to understanding the world in a fundamentally different way. Like the Magi, when we truly understand, we need to have the courage to act on our understanding. Like the Magi, we act best when we act together.

That’s what it means to be a Christian. That’s what it means to be a church. On this Epiphany Sunday, thanks be to God.
Amen