

Stewardship Sermon Starters

January, 2013

Prepared by Rev. Gary Hedding, Bethlehem Lutheran, Cedar Falls, IA

January 6, 2013

The Epiphany of our Lord – Matthew 2:1-12

I don't usually advocate dictionary definitions of words in sermons, but I'm making an exception in this case. "Epiphany" is a church-word that, ironically, has provided little insight to most people, so a definition might help: Dictionary.com has as its third meaning "a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience."

God uses a star, or the movements of planets, to tip off Gentile astrologers to the coming of the King of the Jews. How generous of God not to keep that a secret from these bystanders, who, just by doing their ordinary jobs, discover the entry of God into the world in the birth of Jesus. It would have been far safer for Jesus, and for the other boy babies of Bethlehem, to have kept a lid on that information. Of course, generosity can be dangerous. Maybe not life and death dangerous, as it is here, but any time a person gives generously there is a loss of what that resource or asset could have done for the giver, if only he or she had not given it away. God assumes the risk of generously revealing God's presence in Jesus over and over again – this is only an early epiphany. Eventually, the risk is proven to be real and Jesus is put to death, but God has always seen it as a risk worth taking.

The magi respond with generosity – how could they do otherwise? They have an inkling that this child will have an impact on the world that they cannot imagine, so they generously give their time in travel, their honor in homage, and their gifts in worship.

January 13, 2013

The Baptism of our Lord – Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The people get into the Advent spirit in this text, “filled with expectation”. They begin to wonder if John might be the Messiah. John has more of the traditional characteristics of the Messiah that Israel expected than Jesus did. Winnowing forks, threshing floors, chaff being burned – these have a messianic ring to them that sparked the interest of many people.

John, however, proves himself to be “a steward of the mysteries of God” as Paul writes about himself and his colleagues in 1 Corinthians 4:1. I don’t know if there was a moment when John imagined taking up the mantle of the Messiah himself. We do know that, later in his ministries, he had questions about whether Jesus was the real deal as Messiah.

Somehow, John came to the conclusion that his job was not to improvise on the good news of Jesus. He was not to exercise judgment over the message to revise the message. His calling was to pass on the good news that “the one who is more powerful than I is coming”.

We have been entrusted with many gifts in our lives, but none more precious than the good news of Jesus. We are stewards of the mysteries of God, none of which is more mysterious than the news of the Messiah hung on a cross for the redemption and renewal of an enslaved and broken world. If the world is to hear this good news it will come from our lips. If the world is to see this good news it will be seen in lives of humble service to our neighbor. It is not news about us, but we are the ones to faithfully follow John and point to the mighty one, the humble one, the dying one, and the rising one.

January 20, 2013

2 Epiphany – John 2:1-11

The chief steward is a professional. He knows his business, and his business is to wow the guests at the wedding party. He knows that you lead with the good wine, when the palates of the guests are at their most discriminating. Later, when their tongues and nostrils are numbed with alcohol, you can get away with the cheap stuff. So, the chief steward is offended when, late in the party, a huge amount of amazing wine is brought to his attention, his response is “what were you saving this for?”

Jesus extends his power, as always, for the sake of the other. The celebration of the nuptials is in danger and the honor of the host is at stake, so Jesus provides 120 gallons of some of the best wine the chief steward (who knows his wine) has ever tasted.

The message is much more than just, “Be like Jesus and always do your very best for others. Seek excellence in your service.” God provides us with rich gifts and assets, some of which we may not even have discovered yet. Like the chief steward, our calling is to faithfully dispense these unexpected resources. Our task is to ask ourselves, “What have I been saving this for?” Once we discover that our calling is to follow Jesus, we will address the needs and honor of the neighbor. We will be surprised at the riches we have in our abilities, talents, financial assets, and connections, and we will see how we might faithfully and generously share those with others to whom God directs us. What are we saving them for?

January 27, 2013

3 Epiphany – Luke 4:14-21

Jesus has come from the wilderness where he wrestled with what the voice at his baptism might mean when he was called God's beloved Son. Jesus has rejected three fairly attractive candidates for an understanding of messiahship. He has turned down a full belly as his due. He passes on glory and authority in the world. He discards spectacular religious acts as appropriate for his mission or as being consistent with the Son of God.

Jesus waits until he is home to reveal his "theme Bible verse", which gives him understanding and life, and into which he will live. He is so convinced that this is his calling, and so sure that God will bring it about in him, that he states that everything promised in this reading from Isaiah 61:1-2 "has been fulfilled in your hearing". This raises the stewardship disciplines of hearing and doing.

We have the call to be stewards of our hearing. Jesus says that the fulfillment of that mighty promise through Isaiah is fulfilled by him, but it is fulfilled in our hearing; in our midst; not without human perception. We have a call to place ourselves in the presence of the good news of Jesus, so that there might be an increase of fulfillment.

We also have the call to be stewards of what we do. We are not thoughtless or aimless in our actions. Our thoughts are of Jesus and our aim is to follow him. Remembering Jesus' theme verse is a good way to focus our lives if we hope to be made Jesus' own. Our actions are faithful when we attend to the poor, captive, blind, oppressed, and those in need of a jubilee. This is a much higher calling than full bellies, glory, or even religious spectacle.