

Carol's reflection – January 3, 2021

Not far from New York City is White Plains Presbyterian Church. A number of years ago, the Rev. Lynn Dunn, had an idea for Epiphany Sunday.

Epiphany Sunday traditionally tells the story of the Magi who follow the star to Bethlehem to find the Messiah, the Christ Child. It is the story on which we have been reflecting in the weeks of Advent. To see the star was to recognize that the world had new possibilities. In seeing the star and then following it, the magi came face to face with the power of Herod. The Christ child was the challenge to the way of the world – instead of oppression and might the Christ child was the promise to lift the lowly, feed the hungry, and bring mercy generation to generation. The Christ child was a declaration of God's love from which we could never, ever be separated. And the magi were living hope for the world. The possibilities embodied in the child left them 'overwhelmed with joy'. In their joy, and in their journey, they were daring to proclaim that a new realm was dawning and that Herod and all the oppressors of the world would not then, or ever, have the last word.

And, in the reading for that Sunday, and the one today, came the reading from the Gospel of John. It is a reading about the Word –

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

So, on a Sunday when we think about the guiding star, and the Word, Lynn's idea was engaging. She cut paper stars – loads of them, and on each one, she wrote a word. Every word was unique. And she put all the stars on the communion table and as part of worship, people came forward and chose a star. Only when they turned the star over, did they see the word. The idea was that the word would be a reflection point for the year. Maybe it would make sense from the moment it was read, but it was also possible that the word would need longer thought and consideration. Lynn's words included 'triumph, poetry, wrestle, justice, delight, forgiveness, perseverance, show, fun, art, recreate'.

The idea of Epiphany stars grows every year with more and more congregations writing lists of words and cutting paper stars. The minister of another congregation recounts the irony of the end of the service, when as people were leaving, a star dropped and on being found, a voice cried out – 'Hey, someone left forgiveness in the pew'!

At the Thursday ZOOM, we tried out Epiphany words. We did not have paper stars –

those have to be made at home in this pandemic, but we had words. The words were written on a grid, and people were invited to give a reference point to their word. The words were then emailed to each person – it is up to each to decide if the word is private for reflection, or something to be shared. If you missed out on the ZOOM but would like a ‘word’, please reach us at home – there are lots of words left!

In John’s Gospel, it goes on:

What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

It is an absolutely magnificent image. Those words are a moment of Epiphany, of opening, of understanding. God’s love is so great that nothing can overcome it. The light of God’s love is gleaming.

The Word is life, creation is life. In the beginning. And, in the end. And, in every bit in between.

This pandemic has put us into a strange time.

In the beginning the virus lived over there, away. In the beginning, it was someone else’s problem – or so we were told.

But that is not how it has come to pass. We are ever so acutely aware of our global connectedness. Just a few short months ago, we heard about a virus across the world and many thought – that’s sad that it’s happening there. Good thing we are here.

Now, we hear word of a virus variant far away and we are all acutely attentive – because we have learned that there is no such thing as ‘over there’.

We are all connected. And that is a good lesson for us. We are all connected – we are neighbours with one another. The Epiphany is that God’s love is for all. The star and the magi offer a way of hope that powers of the world that oppress people, that undervalue people, that discard the environment, those will be overturned. The gift of the child is the gift of hope for all.

The Messy Church story at the end of January is the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke’s Gospel. When we met for planning this week, we talked about what it means to be a good neighbour in a pandemic. Clearly, it means wearing a mask,

washing our hands, and more – because, to be part of a community, to be a neighbour, is to recognize the needs of the whole – not just ourselves.

If COVID is a problem for others, it is a problem for us.

And that is because we know that the Word was life for all people. That's in the beginning, and for all days.