

“...and there, ahead of them...”
A Sermon for The Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, January 6, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king they set out; **and there ahead of them**, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Matthew 2:1-12

Will you pray with me. God of starlight, God of starbright, shine a little light on our wandering thoughts this day. Open us to the reality of what is out there ahead of us. Lead us into this coming year that we might face it with courage and thanksgiving, no matter what the future holds for each of us. Amen.

It’s Epiphany Sunday in the Christian calendar! This Sunday marks the end of the 12 days of Christmas and the sudden awareness of the personhood and divinity of Jesus, the Christ child. This is the day we read about some wise guys – maybe three kings, maybe three astrologers, maybe three holy men, but definitely three Gentiles (meaning they weren’t Jewish) – being lead by a star that beckons them to a baby’s cradle. The text doesn’t tell us there were *three* of them, but the Christmas carol about them sure does! When they find the baby, they pay their respects – their homage – they bow down to this little one who would become a world changing figure before he reached the age of thirty.

There are several definitions of the word “epiphany.” Epiphany with a capital “E” designates “the Christian festival celebrating Jesus’s divinity.” Epiphany with a small “e” means a “sudden realization,” or an “appearance of god” with a small or capital “g.” I’d add my own definition of an epiphany – it’s when a light bulb goes off in my head, and I say, “Ohhhhh, THAT’S what that means!”

Those three wise guys in our passage from Matthew for this morning, and in our hymn, “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” weren’t Christians, but you might say they were forerunners of our early Christian brothers and sisters. *They* had an epiphany! They followed a star and came to recognize in this little baby – a savior – a king, if you will, who did not carry a gold staff and wear gold laden robes and wear a king’s crown. He wasn’t a power hungry ego manic like King

Herod seemed to be! He most likely carried a hand cut staff of wood, as he grew up, if he carried anything at all, and wore muslin or other rough cut cloth as a covering, and probably no head gear to designate his position in society. *He* was born of God, and because of that.... *his* kingdom was not of *this* world....

Three strangers from afar walk into a little town, maybe a little like Thomaston without running water, and seek out a mother and child. They lay before him gifts of great value – one representing royalty – the holy royalty which Jesus would become – gold, a second, representing worship of a divinity – frankincense, and a third representing a sign of death, which was used as an anointing spice for someone who had died – myrrh.

Is this a true telling of something that happened two thousand years ago, or is it just a story.... but one that has generated one of the most well known Christmas carols in history?! “We three kings of orient are...” Are they.... three kings, or astrologers, in search of a real savior, or are they simply the main characters in a Bible story – told to make a point, to tell how the divine comes to earth in human form?

We’ll never know which, but we can know this – “an epiphany is not something to be hidden. It is something to be shared. [One commentator on this story says,] In fact if one is inclined to hide an epiphany, as if it were some private possession to be protected, then there is reason to question if it is a genuine epiphany at all. Spiritual maturity inspires one to be generous, rather than fearful or stingy. It triggers eagerness to share, rather than protectiveness and hoarding. The wise men again are our model in their giving priceless gifts and adoration.”¹

Do *we* share our epiphanies, our sudden realizations of something we didn’t know before, the light bulbs that go off in our heads when we are surprised at some new knowledge.... or do we hold them inside, or maybe think they’re not really epiphanies at all? Maybe they’re just coincidences, or something we ate last night that we shouldn’t have – especially if they show up in dreams. Who follows their dreams anyway? The wise men did....

The older I become, my epiphanies seem to revolve more and more around death. Maybe that's because I had to finally resign myself to the fact that I am NOT "middle aged" any more! I now get a break on the price of my Dunkin Donuts and MacDonal'd's coffee because of my gray hair and advancing age! And, I've reached that time in life when I do "religiously" read the obituaries every morning in the Knox and Waldo editions of the Free Press. Anyone else do that?

I lost my closest friend in 2015 to ovarian cancer. Kathy was 67. I was with her when she died. I've almost lost both of my brothers.... but they're still hanging on, by a few threads, at the ages of 78 and almost 80. The older I become, the more dying and death smacks me in the head and makes me realize I need to focus on the question of poet Mary Oliver, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"²

My epiphanies of late – probably as a result of my advancing age and my increasing awareness of dying and death all around me -- have perhaps led me to you -- my newest companions on this journey called life, this one wild and precious life we will share for the coming months.

¹William V. Arnold, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 216.

²Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," appears in several of the books of Mary Oliver's poems, most recently in *Devotions, The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, New York: Penguin Press, 2017, p. 316.

Life and death matters are getting my attention more and more! And this week that attention lead me to this epiphany – we’re *all* on “borrowed time.” From the time we take our first breath coming out of our mothers’ wombs to when we take our last breath – whether that be when we’re 90 or 9 or just a few hours or days old – we’re on borrowed time.

This is the time we’ve been lent to share with one another in this lifetime. In due time, and we never know when that due time will come, we’re going to be “returned to sender.” In my way of thinking, the sender is God, our Creator, our originator. Some day – and it could be soon, or it could be years down the road – *my* lender is going to call me back. I’m going to be returned to sender. We all are. Jesus was....

This may sound kind of silly to you, or so obvious that you don’t think it’s worth pondering. But I’ll tell you.... I’ve been pondering it especially in this past week! We’re *all* on borrowed time....

not just those on death row in a prison,

not just those whose medical conditions have made them dramatically conscious that they may not have much time left to live,

not just those who sing the words to John Lennon’s song about borrowed time, “Living on borrowed time, without a thought for tomorrow, living on borrowed time”....

“Without a thought for tomorrow” I have to admit that this epiphany about borrowed time has brought me some comfort in recent months as I have been going through a transition from being a settled pastor for over eighteen years to being your interim pastor.

We cannot have a real clue about what tomorrow will bring. Those wise guys from the Orient, who followed a star “there ahead of them,” (Matt 2:9) couldn’t have a real clue about what was going to happen after they paid homage and left their fancy gifts for the baby Jesus.

None of us knows what tomorrow will bring, but we can be very conscious of living on borrowed time *in this moment, on this day....* if we choose to be aware of that reality. Mary Oliver's question is tapping me on the shoulder almost daily now, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

So my light bulb moment, my epiphany, in this past week revolves around borrowed time. We’re all on borrowed time. And one day we’ll be called in, returned to the sender who pushed us out into the world with a gentle shove and said, “Serve others.”

So I leave you with two questions this morning, which I’ll have for you to carry in your pockets – What star is leading you to find the miracles in your life? and What will you do with your one wild and precious life from this day forward?

Let the people say, “Amen.”

“When I was younger
Living confusion and deep despair
When I was younger
Living illusion of freedom and power
When I was younger
Full of ideas and broken dreams, my friend
When I was younger
Everything simple but not so clear
Living on borrowed time
Without a thought for tomorrow
Living on borrowed time
Without a thought for tomorrow
Now I am older
The more that I see the less that I know for sure
Now I am older
The future is brighter and now is the hour
Living on borrowed time
Without a thought for tomorrow
Living on borrowed time
Without a thought for tomorrow
Good to be older
Would not exchange a single day or year
Good to be older
Do not believe in [Incomprehensible]
Living on borrowed time
Without a thought for tomorrow
Living on borrowed time
Without a thought for tomorrow”