

Epiphany – an important truth suddenly become clear!

Isaiah 60: 1-6 Arise, shine, for your light has come.

Ephesians 3: 1-12 Boldness and confidence through faith

Today is Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany. Epiphany is defined as an important truth that suddenly becomes clear. An epiphany: “there comes some moment when an important truth suddenly becomes clear and we can reinterpret our past and rethink our way into the future, into the light of it.”¹ An epiphany is the moment when suddenly the past makes sense; and the future suddenly becomes clear and calls for a new direction.

Becoming an affirming church was an epiphany moment in the history of this congregation. It was the moment when Robertson-Wesley became a visible sign of our practice of welcome and inclusion to the community in which we live. In that moment we set off in a direction that intentionally sought ways to reach out to the LGBTQ2S+ community. By becoming an affirming congregation, we have committed to being a congregation within the United Church of Canada that has taken and will continue to take a public stance for the inclusion of all people in both the church and the broader community regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ability or any other difference that too easily becomes a barrier. Epiphany Sunday is our opportunity to reaffirm this direction and journey even further into the light; into the light of acceptance. So, what is being revealed to us on this Epiphany Sunday? What is being revealed to all of humankind in Jesus Christ about God’s hidden wisdom.

The story of the journey of the wisemen to see baby Jesus, reveals that even in his infancy, Jesus Christ is for all of humanity, not only the chosen few. Jesus brings people from far and wide together. The wise men were foreigners, strangers to Mary and Joseph, yet they came. The shepherds were also strangers, they didn’t know who Mary and Joseph were, yet they came. So, what does this say about God? Kendra Holtz, a theologian writes,

¹ Kendra G. Hotz, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 194.

“Jesus Christ is the very love of God incarnate and that love can not be confined to ethnic or national identity. It can not be restricted by gender or claimed only by the powerful and privileged.”²

The prophet Isaiah today presents us with a challenge. We are being challenged to stop standing idly by and instead answer God’s call. The prophet Isaiah said and commanded, ‘Arise, shine, for your light has come. The Lord has risen upon you.’ The birth of Jesus has lifted us out of that Advent waiting of darkness and moved us into a time of light and the present. We are no longer waiting for the coming of Christ, Christ is here. We are the ones, by being here today, who are privileged to stand in that light. But this comes with responsibility. Our responsibility is this: we are not here to simply receive the light, but to respond to it, to arise and to shine. The fact is that when we respond, when we arise and shine and stand in the light, others will be drawn into that light too. The challenge for us to live into the promise of God’s kingdom where all people are drawn together is what we are called to do today. Now the reality is that no one congregation can ever be a complete reflection of the variety of all people that God means to gather together, but like a crystal that reflects light, a rainbow is shone around. When we arise and shine, we reflect a beautiful array of light in this world.

For January our theme is acceptance. Acceptance of ourselves and acceptance of other. This is difficult work and Leigh had alluded to this last week, but there will be moments of awkwardness. There will be times when we feel really uncomfortable. And just because we are an affirming church and have proclaimed that and we post a rainbow proudly on our sign doesn’t mean that our work is done. Saying that we are welcoming and accepting is not the same as living it. We are on a faith journey; that means it is not done, we’re still going, and it’s a long one. It’s a journey where we are constantly learning, growing, being challenged and deepening our understanding of what it truly means to love one another as I would be loved. There is an aphorism about learning that I think sheds some light for us in this moment. It says, ‘I hear, and I forget, I see, and I remember, I do, and I understand.’ The call to arise and shine is a call to do and understand. This is why, in the coming months we are inviting congregants to share their stories. In January we will hear stories of why people feel they belong and are accepted here at Robertson-Wesley United Church; because we need to remember that for many of us there was a time when the church did not accept us for who we are; even though God’s message is clear. All people are called by God, all people are given gifts to share, and all people are blessed and known by God.

Stephen Lytch proclaims that “God restores us to wholeness within the community of faith so that we can take our place in the procession and make room for others to join us.” It is time to remove the wall that divides us and them and live into the world of us. People are drawn into the light of acceptance here at Robertson-Wesley through so many ways. One of the ways is through the arts ministry, through the Spirited Arts Studio, through the workshops on self-care

² Kendra Hotz _____, p. 198.

and justice, through music and concerts, through yoga, through our community dinners, through the food depot, through guest-speakers and we have good news to share with you today; for we have taken on a new staff person who will be doing outreach ministry. The position (which is funded by a grant) is the affirming co-ordinator for Edmonton in the United Church. The affirming co-ordinator has been doing some of this work over the past many years through our Presbytery, but with the changing structure, they have asked that Robertson-Wesley be the host for this ministry. It means that this person will help to get other congregations to become affirming. This position will help to assure that people who are looking for a faith home will find one where they are truly welcomed and accepted. It's a position that will advocate publicly, that will work with other groups and agencies within our city that are helping to affirm and love the LGBTQ2S+ community and others.

So, the question remains, how will you respond? Will you arise and stand in the light and thereby draw others in to this safe, accepting, loving place. Do you need to do some more intentional learning about the difference between gender identity and sexuality? Do you need to do some self-reflection on why you react negatively to changes in language, like in our National Anthem, or changes in procedures or changes in how we worship? We need to trust in God's promise. God says, 'Behold, I make all things new, my promise is true.' So, let's be a part of the new direction God is calling us in. Calling us to a place of respect and understanding and mutual invitation for all so that no one is polarized. We no longer want to be us and them, we truly want to live, we. And so, you will notice that we are being very intentional about the language that we are choosing, and we are doing our best to find ways to ensure that no one feels excluded, knowing that none of us are perfect; that this is something that we are committed to and we do it together. So, go into this world and be the light for others; for that is what God has called us to do. Amen.