

# **CELEBRATING EPIPHANY**



**May you be led along a good road and may you be well.**

*Scripture:*

**1 Kings 4:25-34 selected**

### *The Wisdom of Solomon*

25. Throughout the lifetime of Solomon, all of Judah and Israel lived in peace and safety; and each family had its own home and garden. ...
29. God gave Solomon great wisdom and understanding, and a mind with broad interests.
30. In fact, his wisdom excelled that of any of the wise men of the East, including those in Egypt. ...
32. He was the author of 3,000 proverbs and wrote 1,005 songs.
33. He was a great naturalist, with interest in animals, birds, snakes, fish, and trees--from the great cedars of Lebanon down to the tiny hyssop which grows in cracks in the wall.
34. And kings from many lands sent their ambassadors to him for his advice.

**Matthew 2:1-12**

### *The Arrival of the Magi*

1. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem
2. and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."
3. When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.
4. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.
5. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:
6. "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "
7. Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.
8. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."
9. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.
10. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.
11. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.
12. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another way.



### **GUIDED BY AN IDEA**

The magi who arrived at the manger were guided more by an idea, than by a star. Everything about their arrival at the manger is symbolic, but nothing is more symbolic than the reason that they searched for the messiah.

Their hopes were lodged in an idea from the Hebrew Scriptures that success in this world is

measured by a life in pursuit of wisdom, peace, and sacredness. This is the star that would provide them with an alternative to captivity at the hands of conquering nations, conquering economics, and false religion.

Three decades later, the disciples truly believed that spiritual success was different than what they saw demonstrated by the Romans and the pious Jews around them.

And we who gather here today also believe in the epiphany, that sacred values set us free from the physical.

There can be no better example of this freedom from physical dependence than spending 24 hours without electricity. The televisions went down; computers didn't work; people gathered around a source of heat in a safe place; many people talked and shared a leisurely dinner. Cheryl and I played Scrabble for the first time in many years. My sister and brother came in to dinner from Bodega Bay.

I thought I might be speaking to you without notes this morning.

## A CALL TO THE GOSPEL

The scripture today is one of two references that are nearly identical: what it means to be successful and prosperous when measured by the spirit, rather than possessions, piety and political influence.

An epiphany is just that – to stop what you are doing to be with Jesus.

**The magi stopped what they were doing to seek the Christ. The disciples abandoned promising commercial careers to follow the gospel. They put their lives at risk; they put their families at risk; the hope of a well funded retirement never entered the picture. You and I are called to do no less.**

Why would we do this?

Jesus gives the answer in the lessons.

- Matthew 10:39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
- Matthew 16:24-26 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"

## IF GAINING THE WORLD IS NOT THE ANSWER, WHAT IS?

### TSALEACH – PROSPERITY

A word more closely allied to "success" is the Hebrew word *tsaleach* which is translated "prosper" or "prosperity" fifty-two times in the King James Version. Second Chronicles 26:5, concerning the reign of Uzziah, would be a typical verse: "And he

sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God: and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him to prosper."

The word is also used in reference to war or battle. Jeremiah prophesied against Zedekiah, king of Judah, "Though ye fight with the Chaldeans, ye shall not prosper." (Jeremiah 32:5) Biblical success and prosperity have nothing to do with tangible possessions, physical health, and military victory.

The root meaning of *tsaleach* is "to accomplish satisfactorily what is intended." That is success. Many of the principles of capitalistic success were either discouraged or outright forbidden in the Hebrew economy: usury, mega-accumulation of real estate, and enslaving indebtedness.

## IF GAINING THE WORLD IS NOT THE ANSWER, WHAT IS?

### SHALOM – PEACE

The priests were prosperous (or successful) only to the extent that the people were prosperous, which was most often defined in terms of *shalom* – which means peace. The peace the people enjoyed resulted from the moral truth they spoke and implemented. Extreme sensitivity to God's voice was the core responsibility of the priests.

"Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifice as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams." (1 Samuel 15:22)

So there are two words in the Hebrew Bible that tell us about the prosperous life:

One is *tsaleach* which has to do with accomplishing noble deeds.

The second is *Shalom* – which is inner and outer peace.

There is one more.

## IF GAINING THE WORLD IS NOT THE ANSWER, WHAT IS?

### SAKAR - BLESSING

The *sakar* was the part of the tabernacle sacrifice that was to go to the priests for their sustenance. Since there was sacrifice on a daily basis, there was provision on a daily basis. Thus the priests had no need to preserve food for long periods of time or lay up provision for the future.

No single portion of Old Testament Scripture more clearly explicates the characteristics of a "successful" person than Psalm 1. Whatever

benefits or blessings he accrues are clearly contingent on verses 1 and 2: "Blessed is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." The word *'esher* connotes "happiness and contentment," meanings that can be contextually derived only when the word *success* is used. *Peace* and *blessedness* carry meanings about intrinsic values that the word *success* does not.

Blessing comes to a person who finds happiness in the service of others and through the practice of faith.

### **SUCCESS IN CHRIST**

What are the characteristics Jesus had in mind when he told his disciples to turn their backs on earthly success? These three words – blessing, peace, and wisdom were the background of his teaching.

- To lead a blessed life.
- To lead a life of peace and peacemaking.
- To lead a life in the search for wisdom (sakal).

A successful person cannot be blessed, wise, or experience peace outside of the Lord, and service to the Lord through serving others.

### **HE PROVIDES EXAMPLES IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

In the New Testament, our definition of the successful life comes in the Sermon on the Mount. Ostentation is a temptation. In Jesus' day it was a particular temptation to those who devoted extensive amounts of time and energy to religious acts. But he said fasting, giving, praying could be used to attract attention and enhance prestige. This reward of immediate self-gratification was the temptation Jesus warned against. (Matthew 6:1-6)

Such displays of pious acts would negate the successes that were most critical: communion with God and answered prayer. "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:6) Foremost in Christ's ministry was to provide the model of a devoted relationship with his God – whom Jesus said was like a devoted father. Handing out plaques, certificates, and other tangible signs of recognition were not high on the Galilean's agenda.

## **SO HERE ARE THREE GOALS FOR THE NEW YEAR**

- To lead a blessed life.**
  - To lead a life of peace and peacemaking.**
  - To lead a life of searching for wisdom (sakal).**
- Do these without ostentation,  
but for the sake of your soul.**

### **HINTS FOR STRESS CONTROL – BALANCING OUR EXPECTATIONS**

I am off to a seminar for ministers in Atlanta in a few days. Peter will be in the pulpit next week and Kate the following.

One of the papers that they gave me to read prior to the seminar is entitled: HINTS FOR STRESS CONTROL. I think this has less to do with stress than it does setting reasonable expectations for what a pastor and a congregation can do in a church. So I think this belongs in a sermon about expectations for the New Year, based upon the biblical search for a blessed life, a life of peace, and the search for wisdom.

#### **HERE ARE THE HINTS:**

Maybe you need a hint about setting reasonable expectations too: "Reducing the amount of negative stress is no trick of magic. There are changes that can be made in behavior and attitudes that will give balance and help you recover from stressful situations. The greatest difficulty is with resistance to change. Maintaining the status quo is always the easiest course – but not the healthiest.

1. DON'T EXPECT TO CHANGE THE PERCEPTIONS OR FEELINGS OF OTHERS unless they ask you to. If people want you to teach them, they will ask for your advice. You are not in charge of the feelings of others. One of the most common causes of negative stress is our wanting to get others to be or think the way we think they "should." This does not mean that you cannot set limits on what people do or say to you.
2. YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR LETTING OTHERS KNOW WHAT YOUR LIMITS ARE. Do not expect them to read your mind.

3. LEARN TO TAKE CRITICISM WITHOUT DEFENSIVENESS. You can learn to control your feelings as well as your behavior. Control is not the same as suppression. Take information about yourself and learn from it. Find constructive ways to deal with your anger, frustration and disappointment.
4. BE WILLING TO BE LESS THAN PERFECT. Decide which efforts need to be perfect and which can be left alone or even done in a mediocre way. This takes judgment. I want my surgeon to be a perfectionist, but my racquetball partner does not have to be. Much negative stress is caused by pushing and competing when there is no reasonable need. You do not have to run the fastest mile or have the slimmest body in order to be a loving, fulfilled and productive person.
5. HANG AROUND PEOPLE THAT ARE GOOD FOR YOU. Most people want pleasant supportive, positive companions. Get time with people who value you and treat you with respect. Make conscious decisions about the amount of time you will spend with negative people or situations. That decision is in your control.
6. TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY. Cut down on sugar, alcohol, drugs, caffeine and tobacco. Chemical soft drinks, refined flour and many additives do nothing good for us and may, in fact, be contributors to negative stress. Exercise and stretching are excellent balancers. PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR BODY. Stiffness, pain, fatigue, headaches are warning signs. Attend to, learn from, listen, and change.
7. PLAY! Give yourself time to be child-like. LAUGH! Learn to take some risks. If you wait until all your work is done before you have fun, you will be waiting a long time. BE A DOER MORE THAN A WATCHER.

### **SOMETHING FOR EACH OF US**

Your life will be blessed, your knowledge will grow, and you will stay on track to be a peace maker if you practice or remember:

- You are not in charge of the feelings of others.
- You need to let others know what the limits of your toleration are, and you need to listen when they tell you their own limits.

- Criticism may seem personal, but it may simply be looking at the same problem with different history, education and expectations.
- You are not perfect.
- Hang around with people who do not drain your energy, but fill you up with eagerness, with optimism and willingness to pitch in.
- Take care of your health.
- Laugh, play and participate.

### **In the year ahead:**

- \* Let's work at that together to create a place where God's love and Christ's forgiveness are practiced.
- \* Let's make our expectations reasonable, wise, and far reaching.
- \* Let's invite others to share that same blessing, that same peace, and that same wisdom with us.

### **HERE ARE MY PREDICTIONS FOR THE COMING YEAR.**

- Someone with a broken heart will come to you
- Someone/something will test your limits of tolerance
- Someone will criticize something that is near and dear to you
- Someone will expect you to be more perfect than you can be
- Someone/something will drain down your energy with pessimism or depression,
- You will have to make a choice about your own health
- You will have to decide whether to laugh or cry.

In each of these situations, Christ will challenge you

**To lead a blessed life.**

**To lead a life of peace and peacemaking.**

**To lead a life searching for wisdom (saka).**

May you have success, by these biblical standards in the year ahead.



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