



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

429 Main Street ❖ P.O. Box 519 ❖ Ashfield MA 01330 ❖ 413.628.4470
<http://www.ashfielducc.org> ❖ uccashfield@gmail.com ❖ [facebook.com/ashfielducc](https://www.facebook.com/ashfielducc)

Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sermon Rev. David Jones Sunday, February 12, 2023 The Season of Epiphany

Since January 6, we have been in what is called in the Church the season after the Epiphany. I have not used these words during the season and now we are nearly at the end of it, so I thought I better today. The specific epiphany that this time we are in refers to, is the epiphany of the magi, after their gift-giving and their adoration in Bethlehem, because they are among the first to know something of who the Christ Child really is, that he is more than meets the eye.

So there is a particular *Christian* epiphany happening in this season, as Christians retrace Jesus' story from his baptism to his transfiguration. But of course, epiphanies in the more general sense are a part of every faith tradition. The word 'epiphany' means 'reveal'--to have an epiphany is to, like the magi, see something with insight, it means to see something that is hidden or obscured or unseen, to see something other than what appears only on the surface. Epiphany is sight from faith or from hope or from goodwill.

I imagine we have all had an 'aha' moment. These do not come out of nowhere even though that is exactly what it feels like. Our 'aha's happen because something shifts, something changes, within ourselves. Something might change outside of us as well, and maybe that is really the key--an epiphany is a sudden connection, not previously made, between what is happening outside of us and what is happening within, that brings new clarity and new meaning. Even if you are not religious, I imagine you experience your epiphanies like a religious or spiritual experience, that there is a weight to an epiphany, usually it is joyous or it may be overwhelming in other ways. The connotation in the season after the epiphany, in the context of the Christian liturgical calendar, is joyous, the epiphany is filled with wonder and joy and excitement. But it is also a grave matter, as we will experience as we move into Lent and then Easter. Epiphanies are not light things, they do not come and go and leave us unchanged; an epiphany remakes us, reorients our whole lives--that is the kind of seriousness we are talking about. Nothing is the same in the season after the epiphany. You cannot turn back, you can't ever unsee what you have now laid your eyes on.

I found our scripture reading today a little off putting at first. It makes life sound so easy, you know, just stretch out your hand and choose whatever you'd like in this life. But life is not like that at all. There are so many choices that are denied to us. Or worse, I think: in this life, even when you have made a choice, it doesn't always pan out.

In my own experience, I will say the hardest working people I have ever met, the most generous, the least complicit, maybe the only innocent people I've known, have also been suffering the most. I knew a single mother who took the bus in Jacksonville two hours to get to a minimum wage job, where she worked in intolerable conditions--where she was told she couldn't use the bathroom during work hours, where she yelled at to hurry up on the one ten minute break she got all shift, where she was verbally harassed to work faster and sexually harassed on the job by her supervisor--only to take another two hour ride to get home to her baby, to her own Hugo, and do it all over again the next day in a city that

was failing people like her, all for an employer that didn't respect her...so no, I don't believe people get what they deserve, we do not always get what we choose, it is not so simple as that.

But that experience taught me something about epiphanies. They are not always like Paul's on the road to Damascus, or the magi getting to the birthplace of Christ beneath a star. Sometimes an epiphany comes over us with time, there may not be an 'aha' moment, you just might one day wake up and know that you are seeing things very differently than you once did.

As we move from these simpler verses in our reading that can be difficult to accept, about getting what we choose in this life, we get to a pretty serious claim: the author writes, "[God] has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and [God] has not given anyone permission to sin." That workplace was wicked, and the treatment of this person—and so many others—was sinful. The scripture says clearly that God is not the one who has done that. So if our choices determine our life, and yet despite our choices, we do not get much of life in exchange for them, something else must be happening. Someone, or something, is interrupting or blocking God's order. God is being undermined. The world that this woman is struggling to survive in, that is snatching and embezzling her dignity every single day, is not the one that God made. This too is an epiphany, not exactly joyful, but it is hopeful: we are stuck in a world that God did not make. The world that God made is still here, but it has become hidden.

I feel strongly that this other world between us and the one God made has made this a season, a time, ripe for epiphanies. The world between us and God thinks too highly of itself. It is not humble, it does not have love in its heart when it denies the dignity of those who work hard but are not allowed to get ahead. When it mistreats people in unique and malicious ways because of race or sexuality or gender or ability, it begins to be a world too obviously not as God intended, and the people begin to sense that things should be very different.

We know this in Ashfield and the hilltowns, because God was never so well hidden. That's partly because we live in the woods, atop these hills, where we can see God's true world shining through the pristine nature. Here we know that God made a world where the Sun shines on us all equally. We know how God made a world where everything is connected, where the trees work together to help God's world breathe; that's the same air we breathe now. God made a world where vast oceans rush through the land to become rivers and lakes and streams, making hills and valleys, to nourish an entire, diverse ecosystem, where creatures have life with and through each other, where there is symbiosis and mutuality and interdependence. We know we are one of those creatures. We like to imagine we are the Creator's most adored creature, made even in God's own image. And maybe it is true, but for all our brilliance, we still need and depend on the water and the air that comes from outside ourselves. People don't like to admit they need anything let alone some 'God', but maybe we can admit just this, that we need others and we need other life that we did not make and that we do not control. We need things that are smaller than us and bigger than us, that are like us and unlike us. Whether there is a *creator* or not, we are highly dependent *creatures*.

I can't prove there is a world that God intended for us beneath one that people have wrongly built on top of it, but the order of this nature makes a strong case. And people do too. People who stand up for working people, who stand up for peace, who teach us about a different way of doing things that is cooperative instead of competitive; and all of you, regardless of your particular beliefs, you are here from something akin to faith, you are here according to some hope, some insight, some love...

And that love is another epiphany. No matter how much this world mistreats any of us, no matter how much it leads us away from one another, no matter how much of its deception we fall for, how much of its pressure we give in to; even when the world does for hours or years convince us that some people

deserve to struggle, that that woman and her child should have to overcome so much more than Hugo and me, just to receive less for the same work; when it tricks us into thinking our country is somehow better than another, or makes us feel superior, still there is something we cannot do. No matter how hard we try, no matter how much we doubt ourselves or distrust others, what we can never do is hide from God's love. There is never enough between us that love can't find us. In the darkest place, in the loneliest night, in death itself, God is always there ready to love us. And that's because God *is* love, it is what God does, it is the world God made. But we have to reveal it. And thankfully, we still have another full week in the season of epiphany to do it. But that is our task as modern magi. "We must search *this* world diligently for glimpses of *another*," until what we believe is what we see, and what we see is what we believe. We must love the people of this world and love ourselves, until what we love is who we are, and who we are is what we love.

Alleluia and amen.