

- Speaker 1: [00:05](#) So according to the liturgical calendar, which is the church calendar today, actually tomorrow is the day of epiphany. We're going to celebrate it today because we have to go back to work tomorrow, right? So we're going to do it today. A epiphany is always 12 days after Christmas, uh, the same 12 days that we sing about in the song on the first day of Christmas, on the second day of Christmas. So technically, if you still have some shopping to do for Christmas, please know that you have one day left. Technically you won't be late until tomorrow. We call this day epiphany, which comes from the Greek verb [inaudible], which means to appear. Uh, it oftentimes is used for the idea of, of, of manifestation, um, because it's when according to the theologians and to the biblical scholars, that's when the people just sort of, they got it.
- Speaker 1: [00:59](#) They had an epiphany, how we use that word. They understood who Jesus was, that he was indeed the son of God. And so we use that isn't a, isn't a, uh, a way of, of having one of those, those experiences when all of a sudden the lights go on, things become clear when we understand our place and our role in the world. It's also the occasion according to tradition where the wise men from the East reached the newborn Christ, uh, to offer him their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. It's a story that we all know incredibly well. Right. Well, let's just see. To prove this, we're going to take a little quiz and so I want you to, you don't have to, you can shout them out if you want, but maybe it might be easier to sort of have a competition with the person sitting next to you to see how you do in this quiz. Are you ready? First of all, who were these wise people?
- Speaker 1: [01:55](#) Kings from the East. Okay. We just sang the hymn. We three Kings, right? Well, uh, according to, uh, the, the, the, uh, th th th the tradition, I guess you could say you'll hear is you moments that Matthew says that they were wise men. Uh, other traditions, other, uh, other readings often say that they were mad. Jai doesn't say anywhere that they were actually Kings. Now imagine I is sort of a magician, an astronomer or astrologer. They're not exactly sure, but maybe, maybe the thing about being Kings is sort of made up from legends more than anything else. Where were they from? Somebody said, I'm going to go from the East. Right. So Dallas grand Prairie over in that area. Maybe. Maybe as far away as Louisiana. Maybe just maybe that's far. Exactly how many of them were there? Three. Uh, actually actually according to every nativity scene, every crush thing that you have in your house, there were indeed three we heard just a moment ago.

Speaker 1: [02:57](#) Three Kings, three wise men. The truth is, we don't know. It doesn't say anywhere. Just says that they brought three gifts. And so the assumption was that they each brought one. But it doesn't say that. We'll be reading this morning from Matthew's version. What does Mark say about this story? Anybody know? And nothing. Exactly. You're exactly right. That's a trick question. He doesn't even mention the birth. It doesn't mention the birth at all. He begins with the baptism of Jesus. Now what about Luke? Luke was one of the story that we read on Christmas Eve. What does Luke say about this story? Nothing. He doesn't mention it at all. You see, what I'm trying to say is that we have a lot of assumptions. Presuppositions about the story, most of which are based upon legend upon, uh, artists, uh, among, uh, musicians, uh, among mid rash, which are stories about stories in the Bible, but what we lack are a lot of details.

Speaker 1: [03:56](#) But here is what we do know. And so I invite you to listen to this story from Matthew chapter two from Matthew chapter two verses one through 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 is 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.

Speaker 1: [04:53](#) Then Herod secretly called the Wiseman and learn 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 go pay him homage. When they had heard the King, they set out and their head of them with 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 here, they left for their own country by another road, the word of God for the people of God.

- Speaker 1: [05:50](#) So before I began this morning, I just want to say that it is good to be here this morning after 25 years in ministry, I have never once missed Sunday due to illness. And then all of a sudden on the fourth Sunday of advent, I come down with something and all of a sudden I find myself unable to be here on Christmas Eve. It was unthinkable for me. Uh, and so it is good for me to be back. I want to thank you for the prayers that you have offered over the last couple of weeks and the notes and the texts and the calls. Uh, please don't think that it meant so much to me. As often happens in situations like this, it's the minister that is ministered to. And so I want to simply say thank you. And I also want to say a special thanks to the staff, uh, who stepped in so admirably.
- Speaker 1: [06:38](#) They didn't miss a step in the midst of an incredibly busy time for them to take on my role as well. Uh, just I'm overwhelmed with gratitude for Shannon, for Renee, for the rest of the clergy team. Uh, they were absolutely incredible. I want to let you know, I've been getting a lot of questions. I am feeling better. I'm not all better, but certainly better. As I told somebody the other day. Uh, I'm, I'm not 100%, but I'm a hundred percent better than I was. Uh, the truth was I was pretty sick for a while. I spent a couple of days in the hospital. We weren't sure for a while what it was. Uh, we spent the first few days that I was there, that I was sick, uh, eliminating all of the big scary stuff. Um, but finally what they settled on, well, let me, let me start by saying, in the midst of that time when they couldn't figure out what it is, my kids got really excited, uh, that maybe they were going to be able to name this new disease that I had come down with.
- Speaker 1: [07:35](#) Uh, they knew it wasn't the flu. They knew it wasn't some other things. And so they started coming up with ideas of what we were going to call this. Uh, one of my daughters said, Russ IDAs was going to be the name of this new fangled disease. Uh, my son said, dreaded bald man's disease was what we were going to call it. Uh, I told him to enjoy this because someday he was going to have this dread of bald man's disease, that it's heretical or, or, uh, yeah. So, uh, but finally what they determined is that somehow I contracted typhus, uh, which is not something that I knew what was. And so, uh, I am, uh, indeed on the road to a full recovery. I'm not there yet, but I'm along the way. And again, I wanna thank you for your prayers and for your outpouring of love.
- Speaker 1: [08:21](#) Please know how much it has meant to me over the last few weeks. So here we are on this first Sunday, the new year, the beginning of a new calendar year. It's always a time, isn't it?

When we sort of reassess the direction of our lives, we ask questions about who we are, about, about where we're going in life. And so over the next several weeks, during the season of epiphany, we're going to take a deep journey into the question of who are you, who are you? And we will hopefully discover, as I said earlier, that that who we are is indelibly linked to whose we are. And so are we going to look at what amazing things might happen if we can somehow live into our, our best, most passionate, most authentic, uh, loving self? And so we're going to look at that, what that might look like over the next several weeks. The story that we just heard, as I said, is one of my favorites.

Speaker 1: [09:15](#)

Barbara Brown Taylor, who's one of my favorite preachers once said that the story of the maj I that we just heard it ranks up there with some of the greatest stories ever told, captures our imagination. We put it up against the Christmas story, the Easter story. We could put it up against Romeo and Juliet, the Velveteen rabbit, the wizard of Oz. It stands up for centuries. Poets like Yates have wrapped words around the visit of the Wiseman, Longfellow, even named them Malka AR gasp, par Balthazar artists like bought a cellie and Rembrandt and countless others have painted this. It allowed us to see it in new ways. Garrison Keillor told the story on Prairie home companion. James Taylor wrote a song about it. It is a fascinating story. There's something about the story that just sort of connects with us at a very primitive yet a very profound place within us because I think that like those wise men of old, we are all in search of something.

Speaker 1: [10:21](#)

Something that will help us gain a sense of clarity about who we are and about what who's we are. I also believe that the journey to find it maybe the most important journey with any of us ever tank in our entire lives. About a decade ago, I was at a incredibly difficult time in my life. To be completely honest. My first marriage had fallen apart. I was suffering from depression. Uh, my life was sort of a mess. I was depressed, I was stuck. I was frustrated, confused, to be honest with you, my faith was in shreds, which is you can imagine as a minister is not a good place to be. I remember in the midst of that crisis, there's no other word for it. In the midst of that crisis, I turned to a friend and I just, I just sort of tried to explain it that I had this sense.

Speaker 1: [11:18](#)

I had the sense that I was searching for something, but I couldn't quite articulate what it was I was, I just wanted to be, and I told my friend, I said, I can't, I don't know what the word is. It's not happy. It's not content. I don't want to be

comfortable. That's not what it is. And then that moment my friend simply said, authentic, and then that moment it was like the light came on. That was exactly it. It was like I'd been humming this tune that I couldn't quite place the song and in moment she began to sing it word for word. That was exactly it. I wanted to be authentic. I want it to be genuine. I want it to be real. I want it to be present. I wanted it to be alive. Did we fully awake in this world to be fully here?

Speaker 1: [12:09](#)

I want it to be human in the fullest sense of the word, which meant that my spirit was in touch with that piece of divinity that is in within each and every one of us and I wanted to be in touch with that place within my spirit, but more importantly or just as importantly also wanted to be in touch with that spirit of divinity within those people that were closest to me and all around. I wanted to be authentic and I knew at that moment in my life that it was going to take a lot of risk. It's going to take a lot of risks. I also knew that I had no other choice that up until that point I had been in some ways sort of living somebody else's life. The expectations that people had placed on me about what it meant to be me. I had been living according to a life that that I thought that I needed to be living, but I wasn't living the life that was mine. I was living somebody else's life. Joseph Campbell once said, the spiritual imperative to be ourselves is so strong that the soul would rather fail at its own life than to succeed at someone else's life.

Speaker 1: [13:31](#)

The spiritual imperative to be ourselves is so strong that the soul would rather fail at its own life than to succeed at somebody else's life. That's exactly where I was at that difficult time in my life. Mark, Nico knows all about this. He wrote a book a few years ago called the exquisite risk. It's a book quite literally about living an authentic life, about becoming the person that God created and intended you to be. And he says, when you choose to live that way, there was always the need to risk something new. Now, what you need to know about Nico is that he is a cancer survivor and this quest of his to live this authentic life. It began in the midst of his battle with cancer. He was getting ready for his second round of chemo and he was given a prescription for Adavan. And now Adavan if you've ever been on this, you may know, has a tendency to cause short term amnesia.

Speaker 1: [14:33](#)

And the chemo was, as he says, as horrible as it could be. But he made it through with the help and the support of his family and his friends. And several weeks later, several weeks later, things started arriving in the mail. Apparently he had ordered, uh,

Broadway tickets, uh, books, CDs, uh, and most strangely six airline tickets to st Martins in the Caribbean. Now, you will tell you that to this day, he has no recollection of buying any of that, but he took it as a sign, as a symbol that he was looking for something more in his life, that he was hungry for something deeper, that, that, that part of him started living in the midst of that brush with death.

Speaker 1: [15:22](#)

There was a part of him that started holding nothing back. He also says in his book that he returned it all except except those airline tickets to st Martin. He kept those by his bed on the bedside table is a promise to him and to his family that if he survived that cancer, that his family would go as a celebration of this new life that he found. And that's exactly what they did. It church. Isn't that? Why isn't that why we make new year's resolutions every year? They're sort of help us live our best life to live the best version of ourselves. That's why we resolve to lose that five pounds. So the five pounds that we didn't lose last year, plus the five pounds that we need to lose this year. Isn't that why we, we decide that we're going to watch less TV or we're going to read more whatever it is for you or we're going to go to the gym so we sign up for the gym.

Speaker 1: [16:24](#)

Again, by the way, I learned that over 40% of gym memberships begin in January and go on used by March. No judgment. I've been in that same place myself, but I would argue that in many ways, all of these resolutions, all of these things that we do in some ways just sort of point us towards something different. Maybe something that is somewhat misplaced in our lives, that there's something deep within us that wants to be the person, the best version of ourselves. It's a vow to be better people, but I wonder if it's all an attempt to find something deeper, something much more difficult to define. Something difficult to articulate, but maybe all of those resolutions that we make are more, more a a nudge for us to live more authentically.

Speaker 1: [17:23](#)

Parker Palmer is one of my favorite authors. He wrote a book a few years ago that quite literally changed my life. It's called let your life speak, and I would say that if you're going to read just one book this year that I encourage it to be that it is that spectacular. In that book, he says, before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. Let me say that again before I can tell my life what I want to do with it. I must listen to my life telling me who I am. You see, I believe that the work of the season of epiphany is to find a sense of clarity, to find those moments when we become clear who we are, to begin daring, to live the authentic life, to move

off of that place where we may feel stuck, confused, to begin to live the one life that has been entrusted to us.

Speaker 1: [18:26](#) Great poet. Mary Oliver once wrote a poem called the journey [inaudible] and she says this, she says, one day you will finally knew what you had to do and you began though the voices around. You kept shouting their bad advice, but little by little you left their voices behind and the stars began to burn through the sheets of the clouds and there was a new voice. There was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own that kept you company. As you Strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the one thing that you could do, determined to save the only one you see the work of this sacred season is the journey towards the life that God is inviting us to. Did you notice my favorite part of the whole story, that last line that Skylar read just a minute ago and being warmed in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Speaker 2: [19:43](#) They went home a different way

Speaker 1: [19:48](#) to me. In other words, that's another way of saying the old ways of living. It's not going to work anymore. It simply will not do that. What happened? What happened in that encounter with the Christ child that was so incredible? It was so miraculously, they were now different people.

Speaker 2: [20:11](#) They went home a different way.

Speaker 1: [20:16](#) You see, church, I believe with all that I am that the world is full of stars in the East, that there are events, there are moments in our lives that point us towards the fullness that God intends for us, that allows us to see the divine presence in people, in places and maybe even within ourselves. So this morning, if we begin a new year together, I would simply ask, what path forward is God shining? Truth is we can't go back. We cannot go back from where we came. There is a light shining our path forward and it shines upon our hopes and our dream for a better future, for a more authentic life.

Speaker 1: [21:11](#) You see, last week we gathered around the promise that Christ has come the light of the world and in all of his table turning rule breaking glory. He has come helping us to see the world, helping us to see ourselves in new ways. And we can't go back. Instead we began to go home by another way. So church may you find the star that God has hung out for you. May you follow that path that God's light has shined. You might discover what it

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means to live more authentically, to move towards life in its fullest. And may you discover joy beyond your imagination.