

Sermon on The Feast of the Epiphany, January 7, 2007
Dreams and Journeys

Our lives are filled with dreams and journeys.

The Wise Men, the Magi, had dreams and made journeys. They were probably Zoroastrian priests who enjoyed significant power and societal respect. They were astrologers who were skilled at interpreting dreams. Their journey from Persia to Bethlehem was long and difficult. The distance was around 1200 miles and could have easily taken 12 months to travel.

And yet, without much more than a dream, a hunch, a notion, a vision, the Magi set out on a journey to cross the desert wilderness, to follow a star, to find God. And after having knelt down in the presence of the Christ child, they praised God with their gifts and went away.

Then, in a dream, a spirit told them to go home by another road, to avoid the evil Herod, to travel safely, to go with God. And they did.

We are visited with dreams all the time, both in our sleep and in our waking hours. The challenge is catching the dreams, choosing to receive the dreams into our consciousness. Carl Jung considered the analysis of dreams to be the key to understanding the fullness of a person; they are healing messages to oneself. John Sanford calls dreams “God’s forgotten language”; they are one way that God speaks to us.

We also take journeys all the time. Whether it be a trip to the grocery store, or the beginning of a new relationship, or making a career change, or seeking God in a new way, we participate in all types of journeys. The challenge is deciding to take the first step, determining the pace of the trip, selecting the best time and place to rest, and choosing which direction to take at a fork in the road.

I have a dream for this parish, my brothers and sisters in Christ! And it’s a big dream! Here’s my dream. In 3 years, by January 6, 2010, we will have grown from 350 to 500 parishioners. In 3 years, by January 6, 2010, we will have increased our operating budget from \$850,000 to \$1,000,000. In 5 years, by January 6, 2012, we will have raised \$5,000,000 and completed the renovation of our church building and parish house.

But here are the questions: is it our dream? is it God’s dream? and will we be so committed to and so inspired by the dream, that we are thrilled to step out on a journey that will take us to places that none of us here have ever experienced?

Let me explain.

165 years ago, The Church of the Epiphany was founded. On January 6, 1842, several people met in a nearby home to consider establishing an Episcopal church for all the people in this part of Washington. Epiphany’s founders were evangelists. They wanted

to reach out to all types of people. They wanted to proclaim the light of Christ in downtown Washington. Their first rector was called a city missionary.

Our new parish grew rapidly. Land was donated and a church was built. On July 7, 1844, the people of Epiphany began worshiping in this very structure. In 1857, there were so many worshipers that the church needed to be enlarged; transepts, balconies, and a chancel were added. In 1865, a Sunday School building was constructed; it is now the parish hall. Many significant ministries were established, including the Lenthall Home for Widows, and the Epiphany Mission and Chapel at 12th and C, SW. By the turn of the century, Epiphany had more than 2,000 parishioners and was the second largest Episcopal church in the country. Only Trinity, Wall Street, in New York City was bigger.

That was the high-point for numerical church growth at Epiphany, but for decades, Epiphany continued to play a primary role in both the Diocese and the Episcopal Church, in both the city of Washington and the nation. During the 20th Century, Epiphany slowly shrank in size, but our parish was always a shining beacon of faith in the nation's capital. With more and more citizens moving to the suburbs, throughout times of violence and unrest, Epiphany remained faithful to its call to minister in the city.

In the early 1990s, the parish realized that its financial situation was critical. There was even talk of merging with other congregations. But the faithful remnant of Epiphany stood strong. Significant cuts were made in staff and program, and the vestry committed itself to a balanced budget and to congregational health. We decided to live. We felt called by God to continue to minister courageously as an inclusive faith community in downtown Washington and to proclaim boldly the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Over the next 10 years, Epiphany increased its Endowment from \$300,000 to over \$1,000,000, grew from 200 to 350 parishioners, created and developed ministries, expanded lay leadership and staff, reclaimed a strong sense of mission, and discerned its call to minister with downtown poor, downtown workers, and a diverse congregation. Over the past 2 years, our ministries have continued to expand, even though our numbers have not.

So, when we talk about numerical growth now, our motivation is not out of some fear of financial collapse, and it's not because of some suggestion that we might be failing. We could return to the rhythm of 2 years ago and be just fine. We would need to reduce staff and ministries a bit, but Epiphany would still be an amazingly vital urban congregation.

When we dream now about journeying towards numerical growth, we are talking about growth that flows from mission, ministry, and call; we are talking about faith; we are talking about evangelism; we are talking about the primary founding principle of our parish.

For us to dream about significant membership and financial growth now, when our parish is relatively healthy, when we are not worried about survival, we are doing something

that hasn't been done at Epiphany for over a century. Imagine that. Envision that. No wonder it feels like new territory to us. We would have to go back 5 generations of parishioners just to hear the stories.

Since 1900, the people of Epiphany have faithfully ministered both prophetically and pastorally in extraordinary and countless ways. But, for lots of reasons, the degree of Gospel-based growth that took place in the late 1800's has not been repeated.

Maybe, now is the time for us to dream the dream of our founders. Maybe, now is the time for us to journey in their footsteps.

Epiphany – the word, the concept, the meaning, the biblical narrative – is all about God revealing the truth of God to us humans, and our sharing that God-truth with the world. We are called to journey together in faith and to reveal the presence of Christ in the world.

The people of Washington are yearning for epiphanies. They need epiphanies. They are looking for ways to make sense of a confusing and threatening world. They are seeking deeper connections to each other and to God. They are praying for peace and love and justice. They want to be reassured that God is here, with them.

Epiphany has a mission to the people of Washington; we have always had a sacred mission to the people of Washington. Here at Epiphany, we touch the pain of the world and celebrate the beauty of the human spirit. Here at Epiphany, residents of Franklin Shelter and upper NW can meet and build friendships. Here at Epiphany, we make both music and sandwiches as we respond to the various hungers of humanity. Here at Epiphany, we eat at God's table and we eat at The Welcome Table. Here at Epiphany, we can dream big dreams; we can let our spirits soar and open up our souls to the mystery and wonder of God. Here at Epiphany, we can walk the walk; we can journey in the way of Jesus; we can share the love of Christ with each other and our neighbors.

And the reason that we dream and journey in faith is to let the light of Christ shine in downtown Washington and in the world, to let the light of Christ shine through us, to proclaim to everyone God's love for us all.

Amen.

I feel like singing! Would you stand and join me in singing *This little Light of mine?*