

The Secret Revealed
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
4 January 2009
Text: Ephesians 3:1-12

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands to see who makes new years' resolutions. . . .and who keeps them. It's no surprise to anyone that the majority of persons who make new years' resolutions will not keep them past Valentine's Day. But did you know that your presence in church may increase your ability to do so? A soon-to-be published report makes a startling claim: religious belief and practice promote internal strength and self-control. Psychologist Michael McCullough and his team have reviewed eight decades of research all concluding that religious people live longer, have more satisfying relationships, and generally are happier than non-religious people. Some of these results have been attributed to the rules imposed upon believers, and the social support they receive from fellow members, but these external facts could not account for all the benefits. The new study examined brain activity during organized religious rituals such as praying, meditating, hymn singing, sacramental practices, even listening to a sermon, and discovered heightened stimulation in two parts of the brain governing self-regulation and control. Religious people scored significantly higher in these areas than others—even people who described themselves as more generically "spiritual." The author of the article somewhat humorously concluded that if you really want to keep your new year's resolutions, add one more: going to church. [*John Tierney, "For Good Self-Control, Try Getting Religious About It," in the New York Times, December 30, 2008*]

Early returns on the new year suggest we'll need every bit of internal strength we can get. Escalated violence between Israel and Gaza, predictions that the economic downturn is still on the way down, and the persistent problems facing our struggling city remind us that the "new" of the year may be exaggerated. Even the promise of new leadership can't completely allay fears about the magnitude of our difficulties and the challenge of their complexity. I resonate with the Peanuts comic strip Lucy's suspicion that "we've been stuck with a used year."

Since the fourth century the Church has celebrated "Epiphany" near the beginning of the new year. The word itself means "revealing" -- insight into mystery, an "aha" moment when what was previously clouded or shrouded in darkness is brought to light. For Christians, the Incarnation—Word made flesh—is the epiphany that animates our faith and calls the Church into being. The biblical narrative of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Matthew speaks of ancient Persian astrologers who interpret the appearance of a particular star as a sign that pointed to the fulfillment of a long-desired dream. Like the wisemen of old, we are moved by the revelation of God's presence and power in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. It was so inspiring on Christmas Eve, amid candlelight and carols, to claim the promised "light and life to all he brings!" But today? Where is the light among places in our world—and in our own hearts--- where darkness and confusion seem to reign? Somehow the good news of "peace on earth, goodwill to all" seems to have been lost in the violence and brokenness of the world, the communities, and the homes we inhabit. What epiphany can strengthen us for the coming year?

The writer of our morning text--- traditionally attributed to the apostle Paul---has earlier laid out the heart of the good news: the grace of God has been lavished upon God's people through Jesus Christ, filling lives with hope and blessing, forgiving sins, and giving new purpose and direction. Yet he speaks here of a mystery hidden for ages, now revealed. What if we were to read it as we would a book that has blazed to the top of the

best-seller list, one that everyone's talking about, the book that promises to reveal the secret of successful living? Listen for God's word to the Church in the reading from the letter to the Ephesians, in the third chapter at the first verse.

[EPHESIANS 3:1-12]

If a light bulb didn't come on during the reading of that passage, take heart! The apostle's densely-packed sentences counter almost all conventional self-help instruction, both in style but more important, in content. First, the "boundless riches" to receive are spiritual, not material. The blessings of God's love and acceptance are not manifest by successful outward circumstance (the apostle penned these words from prison!), but by an inner confidence that trusts God in all circumstances. Second, the good news lies in the inclusive reach of God's grace, not its exclusive delineation for a few lucky ones. The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to....everyone, as it turns out. Not a privileged few. Not the good, deserving ones. The secret lying hidden for ages is that God is working toward the redemption of the whole world. The apostle's calling was to try and make "everyone see" that God's plan includes them! And third, the text casts us not as seekers, on a quest for knowledge. We are, in fact, being sought by God. Epiphany begins in the recognition that we are not in control of the mystery; it is not our oyster for cracking. We follow a star not of our own creation, guided by a light beyond our own powers. Our lives are brought into clearer focus not just when we find the baby Jesus, but as we come to understand that God in Christ has found us.

Friends, it is in this contrast between self-help and Divine grace that we discover the strength to live in this new year, come what may. God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves, and gifted us with the truth that is secret no more: in Jesus Christ we see the heart of God, and find it is a heart of love. Unconditional - and yet utterly transforming. The love of God has the power to reconcile people across every boundary and barrier; the love of God mends broken hearts; galvanizes the fearful; turns mourning into dancing and greed into

generosity. To the church has been given the role of revelation, of making plain the wisdom of God. We have been called to this task through the epiphany of God in Jesus Christ, and we carry it out by demonstrating through our words and deeds the saving love of God for all people, in every circumstance, forever.

I can't think of a better description for our ministry in 2009. I can't think of a more daunting one either! Our worship and mission are nothing less than part of God's redemptive purpose for all humankind. An epiphany to share with one another. . . . and with those beyond these familiar and beloved walls. Specifically, this year we will consider intentionally and comprehensively how God is calling us to serve our city and region. Under the leadership of the Outreach Ministry Council, we will explore the role of faith communities in the renaissance of our city, and how we might bring the wisdom and grace of God to bear on its problems, creating new opportunities for understanding, for service, for hope. We'll build on Fairmount's substantial contributions to organizations that are making a difference, and we'll partner with other churches, synagogues and mosques to harness a resource no one else has: the whopping seventy percent of our neighbors who attend religious organizations. (of course if you do the math that means there are still a lot of neighbors *without* religious connections and we'll work on them too!) The January FLYER arriving in your homes soon provides an overview and an outline of initial steps. Please take a first one by filling out the brief questionnaire inserted in the bulletin today, which asks you to report ways you're already involved in organizations and efforts to improve our metropolitan region.

Impossible? Well, maybe. But this is an enterprise of faith. In the biblical story, the wisemen were guided to return home "another way;" they weren't the same at the journey's end that they were at its beginning. You and I can only imagine the ways we'll be changed---the ways our congregation and community will be changed---because we tried to walk in the light of the Lord. Interestingly, the psychologist who authored

the report highlighting the ways religion promotes inner strength confessed to not being much of a practitioner himself. “When it comes to religion,” he said, “professionally I’m a fan, but personally, I don’t get down on the field much.” I couldn’t help but think of all he was missing.

Friends, the start of a new year is a great time to get out of the stands and into the game. What better place to begin than here, at the table of the Lord? Sacraments are themselves a kind of epiphany, a slightly open window through which the light shines. We eat and drink and find new courage in the sacrificial love of Christ—broken bread and poured out cup that paradoxically make us whole. Here it is revealed that others have become “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise”---and are strangers no longer. Here we find access to Christ and experience communion with God. Here we come to know the source of strength for the living of these days.

Is it enough? Can such a tiny piece of bread and little cup of juice possibly provide the epiphany we need to live with joy and purpose? To keep our resolutions? To reveal the wisdom of God in its rich variety? Stick with the church, baby! Not because we’re perfect, but because God is both here and ahead of us, calling us to follow into 2009 and not be afraid. As an anonymous person of faith expressed it:

When we walk to the edge of the light we have,
Take that step into the darkness of the unknown.
Believe that one of two things will happen:
There will be something solid for us to stand on.
Or, we will be taught how to fly.

May it be so. Thanks be to God!

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor