1/3/15 Epiphany: Live In The Light

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)

The wise sages from different lands have seen an unusual star shining over the desert. They’ve committed: IT’s TIME! Time to take a risk and follow that star. They’ve traveled far in the pursuit of the one through whom the light shines, the one we have come to know as the Light of the world.

We’re each called to follow that star...to take the faith-inspired risk to bring ourselves, our gifts to Jesus. This new year, I resolve: to bring my most valuable gift to Jesus. Do you know what your most valuable gift is? Not a brass urn of frankincense or myrrh; not gold, jewels, or money.

The creation story reminds us that we, each of us human beings, regardless of gender, race, religious faith or practice, regardless of country of birth or residence, each of us has been created as a beloved child in the image of God. God, incarnate in Jesus and made flesh in us too. This great gift, our whole, beloved self, is the greatest gift we can offer. Our very lives are the gift we can bring.

Like many of you, I’ve followed the light of Jesus for a very long time. I’ve followed the light I found in him (and reflected in people who loved him, believed in his teaching), since I was 13. I’ve followed from my home in the Flint Hills of Kansas, traveling to see the workings of the UMC in service with the poor and homeless in Kansas City, seeking justice in Washington, DC and NYC, then off to our area UM college, Baker University, seminary in Ohio, there serving with inner city children, as a youth minister, as a hospital chaplain. In my late twenties, I returned to Kansas beginning in pastoral ministry, traveled to witness the UMC’s amazing mission and education efforts in South Africa and Zimbabwe, served as campus minister at Kansas State University. I traveled to China to become Mom to Anna, and soon moved across the country, to serve as dean of students for hundreds of beautifully diverse seminary students, primarily UMC, for 12 years...and then back to serve in significant community ministry in Atchison, KS and serving at the will and whim of Great Plains Conference leadership these past
few years, in tiny, rural Whiting and Netawaka, in suburban, grief-stricken Bonner Springs, and here, in mission-minded Edgerton.

You’ve seen your own star, made your own journey. We each follow the Light of Jesus, striving to give our gift, through days and nights, down roads we might never have anticipated.

The Holy Spirit is not named in the story of the Wise Ones seeking Jesus, yet I’m sure that Spirit was present. In recent years, the Holy Spirit has been like a whirlwind in my life, calling me, leading me as I prepare a way to live more fully into my faith. I’ve seen a star breaking through clouds that have overshadowed my ministry, calling me to risk a challenging new journey. The Spirit has at last convinced me, IT’s Time!

This Epiphany Sunday, I share where God has led me, my full acceptance and celebration of who I am as created by God, and of the valuable gift of my full self that I’m called to give.

On retreat in November, as I walked and prayed, hymns kept filling my heart. *Great Is Thy Faithfulness, I Want to Walk as A Child of the Light*, and again and again, *Lead Me, Guide Me, Along the Way*. “Lord if you lead me, I will not stray. Lord let me walk, each day with thee. Lead me, O Lord, lead me.”

The Lord has led me here to share my whole truth with you. IT’s TIME! I have been an ordained UMC pastor for 25 years. At last, I am choosing to serve in that role with full authenticity, as my genuine self, a woman who loves and shares my life with another woman. I remained single through twenty years of my ministry, then, a few years ago a wonderful relationship began to develop. In the midst of much prayer, at long last, Mary and I decided that the Holy Spirit had whirled us around and brought us together, that our relationship is a holy part of God’s calling on each of our lives. We chose to commit our lives in love and covenant with one another. It was time.

Ideally my telling you that I am in a committed relationship would simply mean that I could relate to you and everyone in openness and honesty, offering my most valuable God given gift, my full self. That I could stop saying “I’m going on
vacation with a friend.” That I could use the great sermon illustrations that come from ordinary day to day life as a couple. I could stop pretending to live alone; that I could stop denying who I proudly, faithfully am and who I proudly and faithfully love.

I rest secure in God’s faithful love for me and trust that God continues to guide me on this journey. Some of you may be unsurprised, even appreciative of my openness. Some of you may be confused about what I’m saying or what it might mean. Some of you may be troubled, upset, angry. I understand. I want to respond to all of those feelings, to answer as many questions as I can.

I am the same pastor I’ve been with you over these past months, the same pastor that has served in all those churches, mentored all those students, sat with families in crisis, addressed tragedies in communities, performed weddings, baptized babies, led meaningful funeral services, and celebrated Holy Communion with you and so many. I’m now simply more fully open and honest, able to share with you about my daily life in a loving partnership, to talk normally about my ordinary life just as you do about yours, able to live my life and live into this new calling, fully integrated, open, vulnerable. True. It’s TIME.

I see the star shining, calling. I’m walking as a child of that light, bringing my full self as a gift for Jesus, for God’s people, for the church.

My serving as pastor while living fully into the life that God has created me for and called me to, as a woman in a committed loving relationship with another woman, will seem to some to challenge church policy. Certainly many in both ordained and lay leadership in the UMC see those restrictions to be unjust, discriminatory and not to exemplify the loving, inclusive Way of Jesus. Yet there are discriminatory restrictions in place in the Book of Discipline. It’s a don’t ask, don’t tell system, so my openness with you, my desire to live authentically in every facet of my life, serves as an act of civil disobedience. My best gift is to no more to be a victim of church policy, but rather to live in faith as a conscientious objector – an activist for God’s embracing love. My grounds are simply that God’s amazing grace extends to all. And All means All. All are joyously created in God’s image, welcomed at the table of Jesus’ endless love, and led by the unpredictable
inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It’s time for that Biblical truth to be incarnate, made real, in the flesh, in the United Methodist Church.

We’re all beloved by God, the real me, and the real you, all welcomed by Jesus, all inspired by the Holy Spirit to live the faithful lives and to pursue the ministries to which we’re called. The weeks and months to come may be challenging for this congregation and can also offer an opportunity for deep, broad spiritual growth. I pray that you will choose to come together rather than to come apart.

I am your pastor and I am praying with and for all of you this day as every day. I covet your prayers as I learn to live into the freedom offered by God’s love always – freedom that I am finally fully accepting and embracing this day. Perhaps the message for each of us this Epiphany – revealed by the Light of the World, our guiding star, is this: We are each created in God’s image, through God’s love that never leaves us. May we live fully into that love – authentically, openly. May we each keep striving to walk as a child of the light.

I’ve come to love you, this congregation, your commitment, care, service and joy. Your faith need not be shaken today, your commitment to one another and this congregation need not waver, for Great is God’s Faithfulness, today and all days.

I’ve spoken what for some of you may be hard words this Epiphany Sunday. I’ve spoken my deep truth. No matter your reaction, the Light still shines. God has been made flesh in Jesus, who offers life to all. A bright star draws us to take great, faithful risks, to bring our greatest gifts, ourselves, no matter the challenges of the journey. And God ever leads us, guides us, accompanies us, holding us in amazing grace. IT’s Time to follow the Star! It’s time to live in the light!

Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. The light shines...on each of us, through each of us...see and be radiant! It’s TIME.

For me, for all of us, This is a Day of New Beginnings. “Our God is making all things new.” I invite you to stand as you are able and sing together...