

“Testifying to — Worshiping the Word”

Around this time of the year, many folks are involved in some significant activities! With the start of the New Year, some have focused on making “resolutions” for changes in their lives. We are also quickly approaching the conclusion of the 12 days of Christmas. **Today, we are celebrating Epiphany Sunday because tomorrow, January 6th, is Epiphany, the church celebration of the visit of the Star Studiers with the Holy Family of infant Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.** The Festival of Epiphany has special significance for Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, because this congregation was **founded by German immigrants on Epiphany in 1901!** Another moment in the history of Round Grove around this time of the year was 30 years ago, when I preached my trial sermon and received this church’s Call to be its Pastor on January 1st.

Today, our focus is on the celebration of Epiphany – which is not only the day we recognize the visit of the mysterious men from the east but also when we focus on the **Incarnation of God in the Birth of the Christ Child.** Although the two gospel Scriptures seem to be about entirely different subjects, nevertheless, they both demonstrate **testifying to and worshiping “the Word” – Jesus – the Son of God – the King – the promised Messiah.** The first verse of the Reading from the Gospel of John reminds us **“the Word”** is closely connected with **the Creator – the Divine Parent – God.** The gospel states, ***“In the beginning the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”***

Paul E. Flesner summarizes the relationship between **“the Word” and God**, writing, “If John’s Gospel were the only one we had, this is all that we would know about Jesus’ birth: before his name was Jesus, his name was the Word, and he was with God from the very beginning of creation, bringing things into being, making things happen, shining light into the darkness.”

Flesner continues, “He was God’s self, God’s soul, God’s life force in the world. He was the breath inside all living things. He was the electric spark that charged peoples’ hearts. He was the fire inside the sun. He was the space between the stars. He was the axis around which the galaxies spin.”

Flesner explains further, “John goes on to say that not everyone got that message. Many were blinded by this light and preferred the darkness they knew to the light which they did not know. The Word sidled up to them and hummed life into their ears, but they cleared their throats and walked away. So God decided to speak in a new way. God decided to speak body language. ***‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us – full of grace and truth.’***”

Flesner notes, “This is John’s Christmas story in a nutshell. ... John is telling us about an encounter with the Holy One.” Flesner concludes, “God’s Word was translated into a human being. God’s self, soul, and life force were concentrated into one mortal life on earth, and as a result, nothing would ever be the same again. Not because everyone listened, because everyone does not, but because the eternal Word of God took human form.” (Paul E. Flesner, Sermons for Sundays in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, CSS Publishing Company)

The **Incarnation of “the Word” – of God** is explicitly stated in the Gospel of John, ***“The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us.”*** ... ***“Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another. God gave the Law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”*** The gospel author made it clear something quite different from the Law or legalism was at play in Jesus Christ! He brought **“grace” – undeserved forgiveness and reconciliation.** Jesus brought **“truth” – revealed the wonderful nature of God – the Divine Parent’s Self-Giving, Sacrificial, and Reconciling “Agape” Love!**

John Claypool explained the dramatic and mysterious nature of **God’s Incarnation** – of the Divine’s coming into the world as a **“human being”** when he shared, “Many years ago, I was walking in the farm that has belonged to my father’s family in Kentucky for many generations, and I happened to look down and I saw this giant anthill. There must have been thousands of these little creatures scurrying back and forth. It was a world unto itself. And as I looked down, I thought to myself, given the capacity of an ant, they have no way of

understanding something as big and complex as a human being. If they were aware of me at all, I must have loomed over them as some kind of ominous presence. Then it dawned on me that if I had the power to somehow become an ant and yet take into that new condition as much of the reality of a human being as would be possible - in other words, if I could cross this chasm of otherness from my side - then it would be possible for ants to understand the human in ways that they could never have known before.”

Claypool concluded, “As I walked away, I began to realize that the chasm between an ant and a human being, vast as it is, is nothing to compare between the chasm between a human being and this mysterious, divine reality that gives life.” Claypool ends, **“And I realized that we are as incapable of understanding God on our own as an ant would be incapable of understanding us.”** (John Claypool, *God Became What We Are*)

The Scripture from the Gospel of John also reports John the Baptist’s testimony about **“the Word”**, stating, **“John spoke about him. He cried out, ‘This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘He comes after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born.’”** The Baptizer’s witness indicated **“the Word”** – Jesus existed prior to John the Baptist, who was actually born 6 months before Jesus. Therefore, the Baptizer was aware of how the essence of Jesus was far older – perhaps he was aware of the role the Son of God played – even in Creation – such as that reported by the Gospel of John.

In a similar manner, the Gospel of Matthew reports the **Star Studiers** told Jerusalem and Herod about the birth of an extraordinary child – one destined to become **“the King of the Jews”**. They told them, **“We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him.”** Such signs as the **“star”** were clearly understood to indicate the eternal origins of the child, so both **John the Baptist and the Star Studiers testified to a pre-existence or eternal nature of “the Word” who “became a human being”** – who was the newly born **King of the Jews**.

Returning to the testimony of the **Incarnation of God in the Christ Child – Emmanuel**, the conclusion of the Gospel of John’s Reading states, **“The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side, he has made Him known.”** **Not only did John the Baptist, the Star Studiers, and the author of the Gospel of John testify to Jesus Christ being “the Word” – the Messiah – the King – the Son of God but Jesus’ life, ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection have also testified about God’s Nature!**

The Reading from the Gospel of Matthew explains how, in addition to **testifying to Jerusalem** about the birth of new born **“King of the Jews”**, the joyous **Star Studiers demonstrated their testimony by worshiping the Christ Child**. Matthew states, **“They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshiped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.”**

Talking about our call as followers of Jesus Christ, Brian Stoffregen suggests, “While I believe that the gospel is always a proclamation about God’s actions, effective witnessing involves a lot of listening.” **“For a proclamation to be ‘good news’ for someone, it has to address their needs, their questions, their concerns.”** “I’ve often quoted this statement from a course on witnessing: ‘You don’t throw a drowning person a sandwich, no matter how good the sandwich might be.’” (Brian Stoffregen, *Exegetical Notes*)

As we celebrate **God’s Incarnation in the Birth of Jesus Christ – the Son of God**, by joyfully remembering the visiting of, the testifying to, and the worshiping of the Christ Child by the Star Studiers, let us join them, John the Baptist, and the authors of the Gospels of John and Matthew in **testifying to and worshiping “the Word” who “became a human being”!** Let’s share with our family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers – the joy we experience because God has come to be with us – was Incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Son of God! **Let’s testify to what God has done for us through “the Word” – “the baby born to be the King of the Jews” – the Messiah! Let us invite all people to join us in worshiping God with us – Emmanuel! Amen.**