

“The Rich Variety of God’s Wisdom”  
Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
January 3, 2016 Epiphany Year C

Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Do you have friends who think of themselves as “spiritual, but not religious,” that is, they believe there’s a spiritual dimension to life, and they may even pray on a regular basis, but they don’t belong to a church, or identify with any one particular religion? More and more people describe themselves that way. Do you have friends like that? Do any of you think of yourselves that way?

In her book, Christianity After Religion, Diana Butler Bass points out that the idea of spirituality has become much more appealing to people these days than the idea of religion. And the church, as we have traditionally known it, is coming to an end. There are some vibrant churches that are still thriving, but they are the exception. And you can see it in our Presbytery. Many churches are slowly shrinking. And some are dying. But this does not have to be the end of the story.

Many people today blame religion for intolerance, conflict and violence in the world. People are more aware of the disconnect between what religion is supposed to be, and what it actually is. According to Bass, when people think of religion they think of institutions, rules, doctrines, hierarchy and authority, buildings, boundaries and certainty. But when they think of spirituality, they think of experience, transcendence, prayer and meditation, energy, wisdom, openness and connection. People may be angry or bored with religion. But they are still seeking. They just want something more authentic and alive.

The disconnect between spirituality and religion is not new. In the story Michael read from Matthew this morning, the magi or wise men were not part of the Jewish religion. The Jewish leaders at that time were servants of Herod, the cruel and ruthless king who wanted to murder any child who might be a threat to his power. Herod consulted these religious leaders, the chief priests and scribes of the people. They may not have approved of Herod’s murderous plans, but they gave him the information, what their scriptures predicted about the birth of the Christ child. And the story for them ended there. They let the Gentile astrologers go find the child. And years later, when Jesus began his ministry as an adult, these same kinds of religious leaders were the ones who conspired to kill him.

But the magi, or wise men, were seekers who wanted to see for themselves what God was doing on the earth. They looked at signs in the heaven and connected them with God’s activity. They had a sense of adventure, and were willing to leave the comfort of their homes and travel in search of the holy. They put themselves out in the world to see and experience God. They were the ones to bow down with awe and wonder. They were the ones who were open to the spirit. They heard God speak to them in a dream, and because of it, they changed their plans and went back by another route, while the religious leaders stayed in their offices and didn’t seem to have any interest in seeing the child for themselves.

The apostle Paul was also a spiritual person, who overturned the religious institutions of his day. Nancy read from Paul's message to the Ephesians this morning, a letter that was probably written late in Paul's ministry, while he was in prison in Rome. Paul had been thrown into prison several times for his teaching and preaching. But this time he didn't know what would happen to him. There was a good chance he would be executed by the Romans. But Paul didn't seem concerned about that. The message he had to deliver was more important to him than his own life. He called it "the mystery of Christ," that is, that "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Jesus Christ."

This was a new and radical idea for that time. The original followers of Jesus were all Jewish, and they believed the promises of God were mainly for the Jews, that in order to be a child of God you had to keep the laws and rituals and traditions of the Jewish faith. Very few people who were not born Jewish were welcome. And even Jesus focused his ministry on the Jews.

But Paul wanted to open that up. He himself had been converted in a dramatic spiritual experience of Christ (see Acts chapter 9). After that he traveled all over the known world, bringing the message of good news. While he traveled and preached, he saw how the Gentiles, people outside his own traditions and institutions, were also being blessed with experiences of the Spirit. And based on those eye-opening experiences, he insisted that the church had to include everyone, not just those who adopted the practices and traditions of the Jewish religion. And this became his life mission, to share experiences of the spirit and God's plan to offer the boundless riches of Christ to all. He called it "God's eternal purpose," something he fought and suffered for, so that everyone would see the "wisdom of God in its rich variety."

What is the rich variety of God's wisdom? According to Paul, it's that all people can share the promises of God, no matter who they are or where they come from. God's love and acceptance, forgiveness and life are available to all people in Jesus Christ. Whatever your economic state, whatever your mental state, whether you are black or white, Asian or Latino, gay, straight or transgender, you are welcome in God's family. No matter what hardships you have struggled with, no matter what your strengths or weaknesses, failures or successes, everyone is free to be themselves, and welcome in God's family. God's spirit is available to all who open their hearts to God with humility, even magi who come from distant lands. We don't seek conventional wisdom here, where everyone has to believe exactly the same thing. God's wisdom is richer and broader than that. And we are to demonstrate to the world, the wisdom of God in its authentic and rich diversity.

Paul showed us that you don't have to choose between spirituality and religion. In fact we need both and we can have both. Paul was led by the spirit, and he revolutionized the church. But everywhere Paul traveled, he helped to establish churches and nurtured their organization and life with his writings and teachings. The early Christians needed the structure of a church to help communicate and live the message for everyone to see. And they needed the spirit to find life. And so do we need both structure and the spirit today.

I remember when I first came here, people were constantly worried about having enough money to run our programs. Every year we would discuss what could be cut from the budget.

And someone would suggest that all we needed was to attract ten more members, and our money problems would be solved. But if your goal is merely to attract members to get more money, who would want to join? What is the point of staying alive if the main goal is to stay alive? But if a church has spirit, if it is a place where people can experience God and learn to live out their faith in community, then people will sense something important happening and want to join. And they have. We don't balance our budget every year. But somehow there is always more than enough to be the church and do what we believe God is calling us to do.

Today we will ordain and install our new elders and deacons. All of our officers are mere human beings, who have lived through all kinds of experiences and battles, physical or emotional. Each has taken his or her own unique path to leadership and service. Some may think they are stepping into leadership simply to fulfill a sense of obligation – no one else will do it, so I'll take my turn. But whatever their reasons for saying yes, we pray that using their gifts to serve God in the church will bring them joy, and will bring all of us closer to God's spirit and life, because that's what we're here for. There will be challenges in the year ahead. But keep in mind you're not here just to survive. You are here to embody the spirit of God. And God will use every single person's experiences and talents to bring life to the world through this church. Not just the leaders, but all of you.

Michael read this morning from the prophet Isaiah, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." God is calling you to rise and shine, and share the good news of God's wisdom in its rich variety. Many people out there have written off the church, and religion in general as either empty, or as a poison that spreads intolerance and hatred in the world. It doesn't have to be that way. This church can show them otherwise. God's wisdom is rich and varied and brings life. You know that. And you can show it to the world.

As we begin a new year, we are reminded that time passes. Most of us don't like to think our time on earth is limited. But it is, whether we live one more week, or a hundred years. And if we appreciate that time is passing, we will value the time we have and use it wisely. Each day we have on this earth is a precious gift. So may we take every opportunity to be ourselves in community, and proclaim the rich variety of God's wisdom in Christ. Amen.