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Sermon—6Jan19
Mt. 2.1-12
“Surprise Factor”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

One remarkable fact about faith always amazes me: it’s never boring!

For example, I always find something to write sermons about. People are always asking me questions about the Christian religion.

And I find that there’s always some problem that I have to face. Daily life can be counted on to present new spiritual challenges. I need to apply my faith to meet those challenges.

I’m not just talking about the important decisions that we need to make. You rarely need to worry about breaking the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”. Someone at work may do something that makes you furious, but while you may have homicidal thoughts toward your colleague, you aren’t really tempted to murder him!

At the same time, though, you will need to make adjustments in your behavior. You have to find some way to make peace with your fellow worker. Otherwise, your anger will fester like a sore.

If you’re faced with this problem, the Bible suggests first telling the person about your anger. If that doesn’t work, Scripture recommends trying to find someone who could mediate the dispute between you and your colleague. Only if those solutions fail would the Bible advise a more drastic solution like trying to get the colleague fired or taking a new job yourself.

But while we may be glad that our faith isn’t boring, we may be less thrilled to note that our spiritual challenges are—well, *challenging*! Some days may be easier to live as a Christian than others.

As I went back to work after the holidays, I found that the first thing I thought about was the lengthy list of things that I had to get done. I had parishioners to see. I had staff to meet. I was facing deadlines that were inflexible—including the writing of this sermon! Nothing concentrated my mind like knowing you will have to get up into the pulpit on Sunday morning and have something to say!

When we need to apply our faith to our lives, we can find it helpful to remember the major feast of the Church that we are celebrating today: the Feast of the Epiphany.

“Epiphany” here means a “manifestation of the divine.” In ordinary speech, an “epiphany” means that something is revealed to us that we didn’t know before.

An artist struggling to finish a painting suddenly realizes just what brush strokes the painting needs to portray the feelings that she wants her work to express.

But one pesky problem with epiphanies is the fact that they are *unpredictable*. The artist doesn’t know when she is going to receive the inspiration she needs.

Think of the three wise men in the Bible story of the birth of Christ. We may try to imagine what the wise men expected to see when they followed the star to the town of Bethlehem.

They were looking for God’s Messiah—the Savior of the world. When the wise men finally found the Christ child, however, they must have been surprised by the humble circumstances of Christ’s birth.

They had brought sumptuous gifts—gifts that were fit for a king. As we recall the Bible story, we can imagine that the gold, frankincense, and myrrh the wise men brought would have looked strange in the humble manger where Christ was born.

Perhaps the three wise men expected to see Jesus clothed in the royal trappings of the House of King David, Christ's ancestor. If they were seeing the ancient prediction about the Messiah from Israel's prophets was fulfilled, that prediction was arriving in very unpromising circumstances!

We can imagine, then, that the wise men were *surprised* by what they saw. There's often an element of surprise in an epiphany because God always acts according to his mysterious will, and we can never be sure how the hidden movements of the Spirit will manifest themselves in the routines of ordinary life.

The British writer, C. S. Lewis wrote one of the best-known books about epiphanies: a work that he entitled, *Surprised by Joy*. In the book, Lewis talked about his conversion from atheism to Christianity, and he described a "Joy" that needed a capital letter, "J."

Lewis was startled by the pleasure he received from the very religion he had rejected throughout his adult life. In fact, he felt that this Joy couldn't be described by human terms like "pleasure."

For Lewis, Joy is a force that takes hold of us and sweeps us up and overwhelms us with wonderful feelings and thoughts that seem to come to us from beyond ourselves.

But if we can't produce Joy by our own actions, we can do things that will make it more likely that the divine will be able to come into our lives. In other words, we can *set ourselves up* for epiphanies.

God will still act in mysterious ways. But if you make space for God in your life, there will be room for the Spirit to act.

Again, this surprise factor in religion is often overlooked. We get so bound up in customs and traditions that we only expect the expected. We underestimate the good things that our faith can do for us—the good things that God can do for us.

For example, think of the random encounters that occur within the community of faith. Two people meet in church and eventually become friends. Much later, when one of the persons falls ill, she chooses the other person to accompany her to the doctor's office.

The first person would never have expected the church to provide a friend for her. That wasn't why she came to church in the first place.

Yet the spiritual bond that the two people shared was the link that could be relied on when times got tough.

All the more reason, then, that we should try to make room in our lives for spiritual surprises! Of course, we can't produce these surprises by our own efforts. If I were to buy myself a watch, that wouldn't qualify as a surprise present! And, in any case, I can't force God to bless me in a particular way.

But there's no reason that I can't keep my soul open to God. I can hope that the hectic day I'm facing will contain hidden blessings. Or, perhaps, I'll have a moment when I can sit back and be grateful for the tasks I have been given. It's better to have something to do than nothing!

By the same token, if I have hope that God will act in my life in a specific way, that hope can be the channel for the Holy Spirit to help me when I need that help. My work will get done.

And often, help will arrive when I least expect God to come through!

And now unto that same God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.