

Thirteen months ago I had a November epiphany.

In late 2019, I was at a meeting for faith leaders in Charlotte that was hosted by an agency helping neighbors in crisis. At this meeting, we were joined by civic leaders whose organizations are the boosters of commerce and tourism in our fine city. And they presented to this college of clergy, a grand vision: a twenty-year plan for the Queen City.

There was talk of a bullet train that would run from down south in Pineville to up north in the University area, and a flashy new Uptown pedestrian bridge, and a stadium with a retractable roof. They spat out statistics about commercial office-space density, hotel rooms inside the city perimeter, coming political conventions, airport runway miles, greenspaces, corporate tax rates, even the ratio of micro-breweries to millennials, just to name a few. "Atlanta's gonna wish they were us," these boosters seemed to say.

The presentation was impressive. I'll grant them that.

But it occurred to me that during this entire twenty-minute pep rally, all of the talk was about **WHAT we're gonna HAVE** as a city. Things. Stuff. And how all that stuff is gonna attract prosperous people to come and be a part of something newer and better.

But not once, **NOT ONCE**, did the talk turn to **WHO we're gonna BE** as a city. And the irony was palpable. Because, there, in a facility that serves the working poor, we were listening to plans for a future infrastructure, that when implemented, will perpetuate their plight. This is a plan, much like ones unveiled every day in communities all across our country, that maintains the status quo – fancy, hospitable things for **those who HAVE**, all at the expense of basic things for **those who HAVE NOT** – basic things like decent wages, affordable housing, access to quality education, and basic healthcare.

Our communities, it seems to me, are too concerned about **WHAT we're gonna HAVE**: Will we **HAVE** power, wealth, privilege, righteousness, prominent rankings in Forbes' and Consumer Reports' lists of desirable places to live?

Our communities are **NOT** concerned enough about **WHO we're gonna BE**. Does our craving for prosperity impede our ability to be covenant people, those **WHO** love God and those **WHO** love neighbor as we love ourselves? Do titles like *Best City for Banking* or *Most Business-Friendly State* justify our poor rankings for things like economic mobility and food insecurity? **WHO ARE WE GONNA BE!?!?**

My 2020 epiphany was this: We cannot really, truly be God's people, until we stop thinking about **WHAT we're gonna HAVE**, and we start thinking about **WHO we're gonna BE**.

And this personal epiphany – the shift from having to being – was made more real in the summer months, as the headlines revealed violence thrust upon black and brown bodies (not new violence by the way!), and the Black Lives Matter movement gained its much-deserved and far-too-late attention. And I, like most of you, spent a lot of time considering the kind of things I wanted to be doing, both personally and collectively, once all of this pandemic isolation ends.

And today, Epiphany 2021, it seems to me, we finally have the opportunity to leave behind our apathy or blissful ignorance; to leave behind our “fixin’-to;” and to simply start being covenant people.

Today, on Epiphany, we've got to start following the stars that will lead us away from a culture of hoarding, and toward a culture of neighboring.

This morning's text reminds us that such an epiphany, such an illumination is indeed possible. We learn about wise women and men – star gazers, and magic-makers, and dream-catchers – wise women and men, who have this intuitive ability to sense, or to perceive, or to envision what has the possibility of fulfilment. I suspect they were the kind of folks who were gonna know fulfilment once they saw it.

And bless the author of Matthew, he or she gives us some high DRAMA!!! Ole King Herod's not just mean, but he's a reincarnation of Pharaoh, even ready to commit genocide and infanticide to maintain his power. I'm gonna offer a slight redaction to our text, and the lection that follows it. I don't think Herod was any less evil or manipulative than Matthew's gospel portrays, but I do think he spent a

significant amount of time sweet-talking these wise women and men. He wanted them to think about what they'd have, not who they'd be. I think Herod painted a picture of all the material things they could HAVE – things that sparkle and dazzle. And power, lots of power; titles and positions and privileges, just as long as they kept Herod informed. Just as long as they helped Herod maintain his grip on the status quo. They could HAVE it all!

And when I imagine our text in this way, I am stopped in my tracks by the power of one phrase, “they were overwhelmed with joy.”

Herod could have offered our wise clan any tangible thing they wanted. Everything was at their fingertips. And by all accounts they should have taken it. Such an offer was too enticing for the scribes, and the priests, and the supposedly righteous folks in Herod's court, who gladly took what they were given.

But a star stopped. And God was revealed in a child. The very One who created the universe – the heavens, and the earth, and the seas, and all the things that fill them – that powerful One, was and is revealed in the birth of a child. And this child, like every child, has the ability to be what God intends: to be one who reclaims, repurposes, reimagines, restores, and rejuvenates God's possibilities for the world.

The wise people sense that this child is gonna be special. He's got power. And a future. He'll be a healer. And a prophet. And a poet. And a theologian. He'll be the life of the party, but introverted at times, too. He'll be courageous. And tender. And thoughtful. And neighborly. He'll be weird. He'll be a rule-breaker. He'll be divine. He'll be someone worth knowing. People will be drawn to him, and he to them.

The wise people sense something in addition to all of these gifts. Others before him have had some of these gifts. But this child will live in such a way, this child will BE in such a way, that his power and his influence will not be used to preserve the systems of this world, nor for his own self-preservation and advancement, but instead, will be used wholly for God's good purposes.

I think our wise friends were overwhelmed with joy, because in this child, they experienced God's spirit, and in that spirit, they were less concerned about **WHAT they were gonna HAVE**, and more concerned about **WHO they were gonna BE**. They didn't need to be defined by having Herod's things. They **needed to be** neighbors who would protect this child. And by being protecting neighbors of a precious child, they would help facilitate a world where all have enough. A world where instead of worrying about **WHAT we're gonna HAVE**, we remember that God has us. And we remember **WHO we're gonna BE**: God's children.

The audacious story of Christmas, and the life-changing epiphany that comes with it, is the realization that every year, God is reborn into our lives, eager to bring love into the world – to show us who we can be. Such love is more valuable and more transformative than a kingdom of riches. Perhaps the even more audacious part of the story is that we, too, have a role to play in this unfolding drama: Being ourselves, just as God intends.

Sardis Baptist Church, I think we ought to let the Joneses be concerned with what they have, because it's not a burden worth carrying, nor an end worth pursuing. Instead, I think we ought to concern ourselves with being neighbors. We certainly have the resources to help us do so: the love of a good God, and the love of one another. And I don't know about you, but I think I'd be a whole lot more overwhelmed by joy with schoolchildren who don't go hungry, and neighbors who don't have to sleep on park benches, and refugees who find welcome, than I would be in the shadows of a stadium with a retractable roof.

We have heard the story of Christmas. And in this pandemic year, we've certainly had the downtime to discern it. I think it's high-time we started to be a part of it. May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.