



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Laurie Brubaker Davis  
January 1, 2017 Sermon

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## When Love Breaks Through

Matthew 2: 1 – 12 The Message Bible; Isaiah 60:1-6 NRSV

Happy New Year! It's great to see you here at the top of 2017: our brand new year, and our brand new chance to get it right. Today is our first day to live into our New Year's resolutions. How are we doing so far? If one of yours was to attend church every Sunday this year: great job! Well done. You're on your way.

Perhaps your list of resolutions looks something like mine: This year I really will spend less time looking at screens and more time reading books. This is the year I will eat less and eat more locally sourced food. I definitely woke up this morning resolving to eat no more desserts. Years ago, back when my husband and I were in our mid-20's we would go out to breakfast at International House of Pancakes, around New Year's and write up a list of resolutions on a placemat. This is the year we are going to: Watch less TV, Exercise 5xs a week, Eat out less. Drink more water. Hang out our laundry in the sun. Of course after about 4 or 5 years of this, we realized two humiliating truths: 1. Our list was always the same, and 2. We never *really* accomplished these "IHOP placemat resolutions" for more than a week or two.

Today, we have the unusual convergence of New Year's Day being on a Sunday when we are celebrating Epiphany and sharing the sacrament of Holy Communion. Here's our questions for the day: What new light can the Epiphany story shine on our New Year's resolutions as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table?

On Christmas, a week ago, we celebrated the miracle of the Incarnation, the Word Made Flesh, the birth of Jesus. If you think about it, Christmas was all God: God's plan, God's action, God's miraculous, mysterious, scandalous move: accomplished with the "yes" of Mary and the acceptance of Joseph. But mostly it was God choosing to become one of us, to show us love, to save us. Divine Love breaking through in the form of Jesus.

But Epiphany is different. Epiphany is about us and about our response to God's gift of Jesus. Epiphany is kind of like when we start to take a picture on our cell phone, and by mistake push the button that makes the picture be of us, rather than the subject in front of us. Don't you hate that? There's my face, starting back at me.

That's Epiphany: Epiphany calls us out, call us to look up, to notice, to see what God is up to and change our plans accordingly. Capital "E" Epiphany is the story of the Magi looking up, noticing a strange star, making the trek to find what this could be about and then recognizing yes, this is the One. Small "e" epiphany is up to us, whenever Love breaks through and we see God revealed to us. When Love breaks through, what do we do? Do we notice? Do we live differently having seen Love? Epiphany is about us and about our response whenever God, who is Love, breaks through.

Let's think back to that list, or let's start working on one: Which of our New Year's resolutions are Epiphany-worthy? Let's think: What could I do, what could we do in this year of 2017 to let the Divine Love of Christ break through the thick darkness in our hearts and in this world?

Does that seem like too big a leap? We know Christ came to bring peace on earth, to reconcile, to reunite broken humanity. What are we doing about it? Seems like another big one that we keep writing on placemats but keep failing to make much progress on. If we are honest, thinking back over 2016, it seems like we are going in the wrong direction on this one. It seems like we are getting better and better at creating our own little worlds, isolated from people who are different than we are, becoming more divided and polarized than ever. Less unified, less reconciled, more suspicious, more broken.

2016 brought an unprecedented rise in violence on the streets of our own cities, and cities around the world. Record numbers of desperate refugees drowned at sea, record numbers of displaced persons desperate to find safety, to find what you and I take so for granted. More and more terrorist attacks in night clubs, markets, churches and mosques here in our country and across the globe. Racism has become more overt and hate crimes are clearly on the rise. Didn't Jesus come to show us a better way? What are we doing about it?

One clear take away from the surprising outcome of our 2016 Presidential election is that we are not listening to each other. Most of us choose to surround ourselves in the comfort of people who think like we do and reinforce our sense of being right. Within the company of our "homies" we can reassure one another those other people must be wrong. Those are the "other" people. The ones who are different from us. The "not us" people.

Here's where the story of the three wise men, the three star gazers, gets really relevant, really quickly. Whether there were 2 or 10 of them, we know for sure that these wise men were foreign Gentiles. That means they were not Jews in a binary narrative where everyone was a Jew or a Not-Jew a.k.a., Gentile. These "Not-Jews" from the East trekked to a

foreign country and knelt down to pay homage to a baby, that they recognized as king of another religion. A religion that discounted their work as astrologers, diviners, or magi. The Hebrew Bible forbade divination and astrology (Deut. 4:9, 18:9-13, Isa. 47:13). Yet this did not stop Herod and his religious advisors from consulting these men or from believing what the magi told them.

The real mystery of the Epiphany is the inclusion of Gentiles among God's people: outsiders are included in the mystery of the Incarnation. But that's not all: did you notice how the magi needed to work together with the local chief priests and scribes to find the child? The magi had to stop and ask for directions from King Herod who had to ask his religious advisors. No one could put it all together without "the other." No one has all the pieces of the puzzle, all the cards in the deck, except God, who has dealt us all in. Living into that reality takes humility, takes listening to people not like us.

Back to my question: What could we do this year to let the Divine Love of Christ break through the thick darkness in our hearts and in this world? I have two very specific, epiphany-inspired and epiphany-worthy resolutions to suggest this year. They come from a TED Talk, given by Elizabeth Lesser, author and co-founder of the Omega Institute. My first suggestion is also the title of her TED Talk: "Take the Other to Lunch."

Yes: this year try to get to know one person from a group you have negatively stereotyped, or just don't know or understand very well. We all have them. If you are a Republican, take a Democrat to lunch. If you are a Democrat, take a Republican to lunch. If you are a Christian, take a Muslim or a Jew to lunch, or a secular humanist or Atheist. If you are straight, take someone who is gay or lesbian to lunch. If you are older, take a younger adult to lunch, and vice versa. You get the idea. You know who your "others" are. Take one of them to lunch, with the simple goal to listen to one another, to try your best to listen to his or her story and share yours. That is all: no persuading, arguing or judging. It's just lunch. View Elizabeth Lesser's TED Talk for her helpful, specific guidelines for actually doing this.

If this sounds a little scary or awkward, it is. But you are also opening the way for Love to break through. It may sound like a very small act in the river of misunderstanding that has breached the banks and is still rising. But I believe that one bite at a time, one "I hear you" at a time, can help us, can help earth to breathe again. Believe me when I say that small moves in one direction or another can lead to huge consequences. Here's what happens: when Love breaks through even a tiny crack, Jesus lives again, right in that moment.

The second challenge is related - work on becoming an "I *don't* know it all" in 2017. Yes, this is more of a general attitudinal shift, but it will help your lunch project to go better. This

is a great way to remind ourselves that we are not the center of the universe, because we *don't* know it all. We don't hold all the cards or the sole angle on the way forward. None of us does. This is a spiritual practice: to work on emptying ourselves of our false sense of divinity.

We can begin right now, by letting Jesus take us to lunch (or supper) at this table, the Lord's table. Listen to him, talk to him: Love breaking through in the form of Jesus, at this table. It seems so small, this meal we are about to partake. A small chunk of bread, dipped in juice or wine. Let it, be the Bread of Life, the Cup of Salvation breaking through, as you taste it. Feel its texture in your mouth, swallow it, think about it becoming a part of your blood stream. Love and Light breaking in to heal and give you hope. Love and light that can crack through the paralysis of despair, loneliness, selfishness, greed, that is afflicting us. When Love breaks through, Jesus Lives again.

Best of all: at this table we don't need to know it all, or pretend we do. We don't need to have it all figured out. We don't need to have a plan in place or a list on a placemat. Jesus invites you, doubts and all, to come to his Table where your place is already set. Come as you are, just come. Just say "yes" to the Love that never fails, let yourself be embraced by the Love that knows no ending. The Love that can make a way out of "no way." Let this be the year when Love breaks through.