

Epiphany Service with South and East Conference pastors, La Crosse Area Synod, 2021

### Sermon

(Rev. John Dumke and his wife, Georgi, from Our Savior's and Skogdalen, Westby. Transcribed from the closed captions by Pr. Cathy)

Georgi: Good evening, everyone, and Merry Christmas. This is John's idea.

John: Well, Happy Epiphany from John, Georgi, and probably Jack, our dog. I serve parishes in Westby and Skogdalen. Georgi's here because I asked her to, well, let's be honest, she's under duress, because she told me her epiphany story that I had never heard before, and I asked her to share it with me and you.

The Epiphany. It's a churchy word. It just is. We have lots of churchy words like eschatology and even redemption, sanctification, purification, and that doesn't even go into some of the things that we have--a host, a paten, and a chalice. If you don't know what those are, ask your pastor.

Epiphany. What is it? It's a churchy word. It's celebrated 12-days after Christmas. Our orthodox sisters and brothers, it's a big holiday. It's where they exchange their gifts. They come after us. For them, I think it's a good deal, because you think about it, it's probably after Christmas sales are really good. But, it's more than that. It's the time in which, in scripture, that's the first time there was a revelation, an Epiphany, if you will, of the Gentiles that the Christ was born for the Gentiles, and that's why they [?] the gift of the Magi.

We read in Matthew [that] they found (the visitors from the east found) Jesus in his home, story is, maybe under two years of age, but that's the Epiphany. But, epiphany, it's a sense of awareness, a sense of awe, a sense of just...well, Georgi's going to share her story and that will explain much better than I can an episode.

Thanks, Georgi--

Georgi: I don't know about that, but I guess I didn't quite understand what an epiphany was. I...until John and I were discussing it (about the sermon he was going to give). And, I was recalling a time when I was in Lake Geneva with my late husband, and my kids. And we were on a boat out on the lake and it's a beautiful day, sun shining, you know. The water there is always crystal clear, and I all of a sudden had just this very calm amazing feeling come over me of contentment, and love, and just happiness being in that place and that time being alive. And...it's hard to explain unless you've had... something happened like that. But, the feeling was something I've never, I haven't experienced since with the same contentment and peace that I felt at that moment being in that boat on that lake on that beautiful summer, sunny day. So, I guess that was my epiphany. You know, the moment I knew that I was loved, I was in the world for a reason, and it was a beautiful world then especially that day.

John: And, I hadn't heard that story, and we've been married 20 years. Yes, that does make Georgi a saint to be married with me for 20 years, but that's the first time I heard that story.

And, my epiphany story happened around Christmas season 1978. It's a long time ago. I know I was studying at [the] University of Stockholm... mind you, I'm not just a pastor,... my dad's a pastor, my mom is a great woman of faith, and so I grew up around the church hearing the stories of the birth of Jesus. But more than that, the teachings of Jesus. My favorite banner in my dad's church where I grew up, it just simply says, "God is Love," and then it goes on like that "Love is God, God is Love."

But, I'll never forget that night I was walking with snow and it was one of those beautiful evenings--20 some degrees, snow was coming down in Stockholm, just a beautiful old city, and I was walking probably six miles, maybe, because I didn't want to wait for the next bus, and so I thought, I'll walk it. Beautiful night, safe, and I was walking and all of a sudden I had this realization that God actually loved me, that I was loved by God!

You think I would have known that, but it was like "Ah," like that part of that, because I was on my own. I wasn't the pastor's kid. So, I wrote in the snow, "God is Love" and "Love is God," and that has stuck with me.

Did that change me? I think so, more of awareness, of ownership, of my faith, but that epiphany didn't happen overnight. It wasn't ... I don't think epiphanies just happen...[I] think a person placed themselves in a position to be aware [as] in Georgi's case, that she was put on earth for a reason. In my case, that [I] got his love. But, it was a singular event, but I think there's a lot of things that led up for...that certainly was the case with the visitors from the east. They put themselves in a position by traveling all that distance to be aware that God came to them as Gentiles. And if you think about it, the Christmas story is filled with epiphanies, because Mary and Joseph they're connected to God in a dream. And, my hunch is if they hadn't had a desire to be connected to God in the first place, they might just, I don't know, chalk it up to indigestion. I don't know, but I hope you understand it. Epiphany is not a passive thing. Epiphany is an active thing.

And, I think in this season of COVID and all the insanity that 2020 was, that hopefully there [are] places in your life where you had those moments of understanding. Part of that is because we have to worship different. And my hope and prayer for all of us is [that] we can put ourselves in a position to know that we are loved by God, to know that the Christ child is for us, but in an active way.

John: (to Georgi) Anything else about epiphanies?

Georgi: They're pretty awesome. Yes, they are. They have one and they're expected[?], but it's so meaningful.

John: Thank you folks, and it's such a privilege to serve with you in our South

Conference--remarkable pastors and remarkable people. Have a wonderful new year. Blessings, folks.