

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Epiphany, January 6, 2019.**

It's moving day. From one Season in the Church Calendar to another Season. From Christmas to Epiphany. From receiving the Christ Child with deep thanksgiving to sharing the Christ Child with deep excitement.

In my ministry, I have worked in elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and universities. Each of these levels of education has its own version of "moving day." But no moving day is as exciting as the elementary moving day.

Think of your own elementary school or that of your children or grandchildren. Moving from one grade level to another is usually moving from one room to another or from one floor to another or one building to another and maybe even one campus to another. Whatever the transition, there is excitement, yes, but also some anxiety, some trepidation.

Will I get the teacher I wanted? Will I be with my friends? How will I handle getting up earlier and staying later? Will I have to stay after school every single day? Can I get all my homework done before I leave school? So many concerns.

Well, you and I, in this place, this environment, this faith, are called to move up as well. It's the difference between listening and acting, between possessing and sharing, between receiving and delivering.

The subject matter is the same. It's the Christmas message of promise made and promise delivered. But the responsibility is not the same. Not only are we to receive the Christmas message, we are to proclaim that message.

The school in Los Angeles where I served was a K-6 school. Like many parochial schools, there was a uniform. The K-5 students had the same uniform. The oldest students, the 6<sup>th</sup> graders, had a different uniform. It featured a blue vest. This vest set the 6<sup>th</sup> graders apart from the younger students, and carried with it increased responsibility.

They were in charge of some things. And they liked this new standing. "Moving up" was not just a matter of a new classroom and a different schedule and a

different teacher. Now there was also more demanding work. It was a matter of adding a teaching function to the familiar function of learning.

This transition from receiving to passing on is what the Season of Epiphany is about. Thanks to Christmas, we have the Christ Child. And thanks now to Epiphany, we have the responsibility to share the Christ Child. We have now the Church version of the Blue Vest. In a sense, you and I are faculty.

Yes, we visit amongst ourselves and support one another in good times and sad. But now that's not enough. Our Epiphany audience is not just one another. No, the Epiphany audience is broader. And it's less predictable. To the point that we're not sure if we even want to wear the Blue Vest. There is some anxiety and some trepidation. Do we really want to "move up."

Well, of course we do. In most cases, sharing is fun. Remember these words of Isaiah (**Isaiah 60:1-6**): "Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice."

When we get a really neat Christmas present, we don't wait for someone to ask, "What did you get?" Rather we say with enthusiasm, "Guess what I got." That's where we are right now. We have received a wonderful present in the person of Jesus. An infant now, but destined for life beyond death. And with a commission, a command, an expectation to share the gift.

So, here we are, ready to go, ready to move up. Now what? Well, we need a strategy. We need some tools. And we need some training. Where do we get these move-up necessities? Well, right here is a good place to start. At least, we hope it is

Strategy. The task is to share the Gospel. But with whom? Here are some possible answers. Those who need the Good News. Those who want the Good News. Those who for whatever reason are disappointed in the Good News. Those for whom the Good News seems to be slipping away. Those for whom the Good News is unfamiliar.

In short, there is no lack of audiences. There is no excuse for not moving up. But rather than trying to reach all the audiences, maybe we should focus on a couple.

For example, think about someone with whom you have thought about sharing the Good News, but have held back because you didn't think they were ready or you were ready. Well, maybe it's time to revisit this possibility. Start small and build.

Tools. What do we need as we set out to share. We need courage. St. Paul (**Ephesians 3:1-12**) calls this "boldness and confidence." We need determination. We need a thick skin in some cases. And we need trust. Trust that we have back-up; that whatever we bring to the table is being matched by the God who is the Center of the Good News. And trust that we need to keep at it even though we might not see the fruits of our labor. This morning's psalm (**Psalm 27**) reminds us that God will "come down like rain upon the mown field, like showers that water the earth."

The end-game is not that we feel good about our efforts, though that will happen. No, the end-game is that others will feel better about their efforts. That's where our joy lies. Doing the Lord's work. Being a happy disciple. Reveling in the growth of others. The pay-off for us is the satisfaction that we are doing what we are meant to do. Like the Wise Men (**Matthew 2:1-12**), we have delivered our gifts, the greatest of which is the Christmas Story. The pay-off for others is perhaps a whole new outlook on life. What's not to like about that combination of outcomes?

Training. How do we prepare? Where do we go to workout? Is there a playbook? And, how do I stay in shape? I know that if I want to do twenty push-ups, I need to do at least one push-up. And then five. And then ten. And eventually twenty. And maybe more, more than I thought I could ever do.

At its best, the Church is a training center, a practice center, a development center. The Ravens play one day a week at the stadium. The rest of the week, they are at their training facility. We need to develop a regimen of our own. If the Church is just a Sunday exercise, or if the Church is just a museum, it will wither. I hope we are not that. I know that we are not that. Why? Because you are not like that.

Some of you can do a hundred spiritual push-ups already. Others are working on five. The point is that we are all developing Gospel-sharing abilities. These

development activities include worship services, Bible study and prayer groups and song fests, social gatherings, lunches and dinners, home and hospital and institutional visits. We build our skills in all sorts of ways, but always with the awareness that there is more to learn, and that these learning experiences build on one another.

Yes, the Season of Epiphany is the Good New-sharing time. But, as with all human activity, its effectiveness is a function of preparation. The better prepared we are, the more effective our sharing will be. We have the greatest message in the world and a directive from the Creator of the Universe to share this message.

As an assignment, as a privilege, as a freely-chosen activity, does it get any better than that? During this holy Season, something to think about and pray about and push-up about. Amen.