

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
EPIPHANY SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“THE THINGS WE SHARE IN COMMON”
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
JANUARY 3, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

The birth of Jesus brought change to the Roman Empire. All of it was not welcomed, as a matter of fact the scripture says *“When King Herod heard this he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.”* The king was forced to rethink how the birth of a baby would impact his world. We too have reached a landmark where we are invited to rethink; Rethink Church. The month of January is a good time to embark upon this journey. January was named after the ancient Roman god Janus. Janus was the god of gates and doors. He had two faces, one looking back and the other looking ahead. We are doing that this morning; looking in both directions. On this first Sunday of 2010, we are meeting to worship at the gate of a new year. Today, we begin to rethink church with a sweeping campaign designed to invite us to become more outwardly focused and engaged in the world. As we rethink church, let us think of it more as a base of operation for expressing our faith and not just a place to come and worship. Let us think of it as a place where we come and get charged up to go out into the community and the world to bring transformation to God’s creation.

Think of this as our base of operation for expressing our faith by moving out from these four walls into the communities around us. Let us become as excited about sharing our faith in the 21st century as the disciples were in the first century. I encourage you to awaken your passion for ministry in this New Year as you discover the things we share in common. The grand hope is to spark a global conversation about what it means to live as a person of faith, a disciple of Jesus Christ, in the 21st century. As committed disciples for Christ, we can become the catalyst for a radical return to an understanding of what the gospel means to us today.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, wise men came from the East. Wise men and women are still coming. Their words of wisdom inform us in so many ways.

Our past has served us and served us well. Today marks the arrival of a new challenge for our energies and our talents. After a church wide survey we have learned much about the strengths and weaknesses of our church. Today we will bank our future on the strengths of our church as we seek to serve God in this present age. That means we will rethink church; rethink the way we engage our community. Perhaps we too, like the wise men of old will find the new born king. We will find him in our efforts to feed the hungry. We will find him as we embrace the call to mission. This is exciting because it invites us to move out from a place of worship to a place of action. Outbound. Unbound. Active.

When we embrace the new challenges of today that does not mean that we will dismiss the great accomplishments of our past. We should never forget our good memories shining behind us. They should be kept and treasured as we move on. They are sources of gratitude and occasions of joy. But we don't all see the same thing when we look at the stretch of road behind us. We find many areas of agreement and disagreement. We have made some mistakes along the way. But this is the time to put that behind us and march into the bright sunshine of mission and service.

Isaiah the prophet has left us immortal words of promise. ***“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”*** Darkness will cover the whole earth, ***“but the Lord will arise upon you.”*** The Lord's glory will be experienced by you the people of God. Therefore roll up your sleeves and get busy. Find a place in the church to serve. Get lost in the wonder of mission.

Church is more than just about singing and praying. This is Epiphany Sunday, the day on which we celebrate the revelation of Christ as the Savior of the entire world. This includes all people everywhere. The wise men from the East symbolize the world's pilgrimage to the light of the newborn Christ child. The star over Bethlehem is the beckoning sign, saying to the world, Rethink Church, ***“Come and behold him.”*** Epiphany makes a provincial or an exclusive faith impossible. Christ comes as the Savior of the world. When God's kingdom has fully come, when Christ has been exalted as Lord and Redeemer of creation, we will come to his light, and experience the joy of serving.

When we come to see the church not just as a place to come or go, but as something we do, we will begin to see the kingdom of God unfold right before us. Rethink church is about taking action on what we say we believe. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the “end” of history is revealed in the present. In the Incarnation we see what is ultimately true, that God's self-giving love has the last

word, that the cross is the sign of victory. Ultimately, the powers of this world will be drawn to the brightness of Christ's rising, and Christ will be revealed in our witness.

As you rethink church, what do you see as you look toward the future? To be honest, anytime one embarks upon a new vision, there are no guarantees that all the goals will be achieved or that all our dreams will come true. Life will remain a checkerboard of successes and failures, of good and bad, of joy and sorrow. The biblical promise, however, is that the life of faith will always be a pilgrimage toward the light. Get involved! Help people find their way to the light.

The wise men were unlikely participants in the story of Christ's birth. Think of it, they were foreigners from somewhere in the East, they were aliens to the faith and traditions of Israel, and they had scant information about the one they were seeking. But they were inspired by a compelling possibility and directed by a guiding star. Their bold venture was without guarantees. It was an uncertain journey filled with risks. But as long as they saw the star, it was a pilgrimage toward the light.

Today we mark a new course in the history of our church. We will embark upon a faith journey. Most of our journeys involve carefully-detailed routes and well-defined locations. Our faith journeys are not amenable to such precision. Soon we will celebrate our centennial. May it be said that after 100 years of existence, the Park Hill United Methodist Church found the passion and the boldness to claim the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are all united at the deepest levels of our existence. We are all part of the one family of God. The differences between us are overshadowed and ultimately undermined by the things we share in common. Rethink Church! Not in terms of what it is, but what it could be.

God is not the exclusive property of a particular race, people, or religion. God will be the Shepherd of all who seek God and of all who serve God. If that is your view, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.