

SPG#226, THE EPIPHANY

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Isaiah 60:1-6, 9

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

The first epiphany In Bethlehem, when the 3 Kings visited, was unique among all epiphanies of Jesus Christ. It was different than the epiphany we know as the Transfiguration, when Jesus appeared in a blinding light with Moses and Elijah. It was different from the post resurrection appearances when he appeared to the disciples after the resurrection. What made the first epiphany different was what happened around the Christ child. There was a guiding star overhead. There were angels singing in the sky. But there is no mention of the baby himself emanating some kind of magic light.

Of all the major feasts, Epiphany probably is the one that requires the most explanation. Webster defines “epiphany” as a manifestation of the reality of a divine being. Saul, after persecuting followers of Jesus, had an epiphany on the Road to Damascus. The Transfiguration was an epiphany. Epiphanies in the life of Jesus were seen apart from his day to day teachings, and probably even apart from healings and miracles. These epiphanies or manifestations of Christ usually had the effect of commanding everyone’s attention to the point of being overwhelming.

The aim of Epiphany is to manifest the full glory of Christ to the world. It does this by appearing as a supplemental celebration to Christmas. It is therefore linked to the birth of Jesus and to the response and worship of people.

Originally the celebration of Epiphany included 3 elements: the Baptism of Jesus, the first miracle at Cana of Galilee, where the water was turned to wine, and the visit of the 3 Kings.

A celebration of the birth of Christ plus these 3 events ideally performed the Epiphany function of manifesting the full glory of Christ to the world. Christmas celebrates the humanity of Jesus. In his birth we see he really was born of a woman. In Epiphany, through the celebration of his Baptism, we see his relationship with the Father. Both Christmas and Epiphany taken together attest to the fact that Jesus was divine and human at birth. There is some consensus among scholars that the early church was focused, not just on a Christmas celebration, but on a Christmas-Epiphany celebration where Jesus' birth, coupled with the account of his Baptism, the miracle at Cana, and the visit of the 3 Kings put forth Jesus as human and divine simultaneously.

Perhaps we can further appreciate this when we realize that the human-divine nature of Jesus was not just a lofty theological idea. But it was a reality that was meant to be celebrated just like Christmas and Easter.

And that the truth of Epiphany was not meant to be obtained in advanced training only. It was meant to be known and celebrated by the people in the church year.

In my own study of the epiphanies around Jesus Christ, I find a powerful element of magic that is part and parcel of all the epiphanies. Do you recall when Jesus came to the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, walking on the water?

When they were frightened, he said, "Don't be afraid. It's me." And in that one occurrence Peter, James, and John knew that it was Jesus. They knew that he was their friend, their teacher. But there was also his walking on the water, something magical. When he was transfigured in the blinding light before his followers, they knew it was him. But they also knew that he appeared in a blinding light. Something magical. And so this Jesus was someone to walk with, someone to listen to, someone to eat with. But he could also change water into wine. And once he drove evil spirits out of a man and into a herd of pigs. And once he fed 5,000 people using a few loaves of bread and some fish. And when he called for a dead man, Lazarus, to come out of the tomb, he did.

Did you ever ask yourself the question, "How would I have related to Jesus in the first century as a friend?" Would you have been someone who always expressed your amazement at what he did? Would you have said, "You know when you walked on the water, that just blew me away." Or maybe you would have wanted more information.

"Would you explain to me what happened chemically to the bread and fish when you fed those 5,000 people? Or maybe you would have still claimed some kind of casual relationship with him and asked, "So, what is on tap for tomorrow? Is the sun going to come up in the west? Or perhaps you will make a mountain move somewhere."

Those kinds of queries get at what it was like to have Jesus as a friend, and also to be in his life as a witness, someone who knew him, but also someone who saw what he did, and heard what he said. And we could say that those questions are relegated to the first century, because that is when Jesus Christ appeared in physical form.

But, if Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist, and if we sense his presence in the Word of God in printed form and in everyday life, then those questions are our questions too. And they are epiphany questions. Because they are about friendship and relationship, and they are about magic.

And the question after those questions is, "What is it like to have such a friend? What is it like to know the Son of God? What is it like to know him in his love? What is it like to know him in his magic? Each of us will have a different way to answer that. And it is part of our call, our destiny, to answer such questions.

It may seem like the stars and blinding lights and the fires of the Bible are far removed from us in the 21st century. But if you asked me if I had seen more than one person in this parish glowing with the presence of Christ, I would have to say yes.

The famous Episcopal priest and Bishop, Phillips Brooks, once said that the presence of Christ could be likened to fire. And the presence of the followers of Christ could be likened to candles. Without the fire the candle has no purpose. With the fire the candle becomes like the fire and gives light to all.

Is it too fantastic a goal to aim at being radiant with the presence of Christ? We speak of being Christlike in integrity, in honesty, in truth, in love and compassion and understanding. Would we allow for the presence of Christ to so penetrate our everyday lives that we would shine and glow? Would we allow ourselves to be an epiphany for someone else? In all of our lives, in all that we say and do, may it be so. Amen.