

2 Epiphany 2007 – Elizabeth Prevost

Have you ever experienced the presence of God? What are the moments in your life when you have seen God revealed? In the liturgy? In music? In a sunset? In the healthy birth of a child? In a family reunion at the holidays? In the act of helping someone or of receiving an offer of help?

Epiphany is the season when we celebrate the manifestation of God in the world through the light of Christ. Last week, Charles pointed out that this observation is marked especially by the visit of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, and the first miracle at the wedding in Cana. Charles also urged us to allow for these kinds of Epiphanies in our own lives, and to open ourselves to new possibilities of experiencing the light of Christ. But upon further reflection, that may seem easier said than done. So often in life, it seems clearer to see where God is not. The overwhelming episodes of suffering and injustice in history and in our own day seem to defy the possibility of God's active presence in the world. Where was God in Herod's murder of innocent babies? Where was God in the Holocaust? Where was God in Katrina and the Asian Tsunami? Where is God to be found in the streets of Baghdad, and in the AIDS wards of southern Africa?

These are the kinds of hell on earth that I, in my relatively privileged and comfortable life, cannot even fathom (although I know that these conflicts are very close to home for many). At the same time, it can be just as difficult to recognize the presence of God in day-to-day life, particularly when dealing with material and emotional concerns that overwhelm us: illness; addiction; depression; estranged or broken relationships; unemployment or uncertain job security; feelings of inadequacy or failure in our professional or private lives. Where is God in these places of darkness? Where is God to be found in doubt, in adversity, in loss, and in death?

We've all struggled with these kinds of challenges, although some individuals and groups always seem to face more than their share of hardship. There is a poignant if humorous scene in *Fiddler on the Roof*, in which Tevye, the patriarch of a struggling Jewish family in Russia, pleads with God: "I know, I know that we are the chosen people – but once in awhile, can't you choose someone else?" The Jews living in Palestine in Jesus' day had endured centuries of trial and tribulation as God's chosen people. Throughout generations of exile, war, and foreign occupation, they had anxiously awaited the arrival of an all-powerful Messiah who would bring political and social justice and establish Israel's rightful place in the world. But instead, a different kind of redeemer unexpectedly appeared – someone who was born as a baby and raised in the humblest of families; someone who chose a very ordinary human setting to reveal the first indication that his adult ministry would be anything but ordinary.

Jesus performed his first miracle in response to a seemingly mundane problem. Due to poor planning or budgetary constraints or an unexpected number of guests, the wine had run out at a wedding feast in a friend's home. At first glance this may strike us as a minor inconvenience, but in the context of the social rituals of Galilean Jews, this was in fact a potentially disastrous situation. Hospitality was a paramount responsibility within the community, and failure to provide for guests at an important occasion would have resulted in permanent shame for the host. Jesus' kindness and sympathy saved the host from humiliation as well as the guests from disappointment.

Considered in this light, the significance of this episode may not be so much that Jesus had the ability to reconfigure physical matter, but that he was using God's gifts in the service of others. In retrospect, we may see this as the first demonstration of Jesus' divine nature, but the miracle really unfolded behind the scenes. It is not clear that the host or the steward of this

household were even aware of the close call that Jesus and his mother's intervention avoided. All they knew was that the wine mysteriously got better as the feast went on. Jesus performed a private act of kindness to prevent a public faux pas. Those in the story who witnessed this act were not the ones who directly benefited from it. Only Jesus' mother, his first disciples, and the household servants were privy to this brief but profound glimpse of the divine – not as a display of power, but as an extension of God's grace.

John focuses more than any of the other gospel writers on the divinity of Jesus and on the steady and timely unfolding of God's purpose. This is reflected in Jesus' reluctance to stage a public display, since he felt that the time was not right. Yet the timing of this miracle in John's gospel sequence reveals the complexity of Jesus' humanity – in his relationships, teaching, and ministry. The wedding at Cana falls between Jesus' calling of his first disciples, and his chastisement of the moneychangers in the Temple. John shows Jesus to be capable not just of great compassion and empathy but of anger and righteous indignation. He was always surprising and confusing the people around him; those who listened to his parables came away confused more often than enlightened. Sometimes his work was highly public, as in the feeding of the 5000, and sometimes conducted in very private settings like the wedding in Cana. The most spectacular incidents in all the gospel narratives – the transfiguration, the raising of Lazarus, and ultimately, the resurrection – were witnessed by only small groups of his followers.

I suspect that these kinds of contradictory evidence contributed to the heated debates in the early church about how exactly to define the relative humanity and divinity of Jesus' nature. Such debates are certainly understandable in the midst of such inconsistency, unpredictability, and sometimes, total secrecy. How can we recognize God when we don't even know what to look for? The wedding at Cana illustrates a precious moment where God closed the gap between

human and divine. In averting a crisis, Jesus provided evidence of his divine nature. But there are many situations when the crisis is not averted, and when we do not see any particular evidence of God's active intervention. In John's gospel, Jesus often admonishes people for only believing in him because they have seen evidence of his divine nature. But don't we all want that kind of evidence? What about those times when our feeble faith does not seem to be enough? What about the times when the cancer gets worse, when the job falls through, when the young soldier comes home in a body bag? In other words, what do we do with those times when we crave closeness with the divine, but remain painfully stuck in our own humanity?

Madeleine L'Engle comments that it is precisely these kinds of unanswerable questions which are most worth asking, for they lead us to the places where God is revealed in both glorious and modest ways. In her memoir of her husband's battle with cancer that ultimately ended in death, she writes that she found comfort in the belief that "Any God worth believing in is the God not only of the immensities of the galaxies I rejoice in at night...but also the God of love who cares about the sufferings of us human beings and is here, with us, for us, in our pain and in our joy." L'Engle recalls a time in the final months of her husband's life when she came across some verse of Yeats that read:

But love has pitched her mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.

Reflecting on these lines, L'Engle wrote, "This summer is not the first time I have walked through the place of excrement and found love's mansion there. Indeed, we are more likely to find it in the place of excrement than in the sterile places. God comes where there is pain and brokenness, waiting to heal, even if the healing is not the physical one we hope for."

The term “Epiphany” implies a lightening bolt moment of recognition or inspiration. But for me, epiphanies are those small, unexpected glimpses of grace when we sense, inexplicably, that God is with us. This means that it is not just the removal of problems, but the problems themselves, which illuminate God’s love. God is there, in pain as well as joy, despair as in hope, in illness as in healing, in addiction as well as recovery, in brokenness as well as reconciliation, in doubt as well as faith. God is there, not only in life, but even in death. That, for me, is the mystery and the paradox of the incarnation: that it is the very humanness of our lives that reveals the divinity of God. If we allow ourselves to find love’s mansion in these dark and unlikely places, we can begin to trust the simple and comforting words of Julian of Norwich that “all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Amen.