

After the Epiphany
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There are people from all walks of life across the scripture readings this morning. We hear stories about wise men from far off lands; and shepherds surprised by angelic choirs; and we even get a letter writing disciple in the mix telling his own tale. We may have grown to expect the first two readings this time of year, because they are well know parts of the Christmas story. Then there's that third reading. The third reading may seem a little bit like the odd one out at first listen. But the three stories do have something in common: they all concern different sorts of epiphanies.

Epiphany is a funny term. We tend to look at it too narrowly, or too broadly. In Christian circles, it is usually reserved for the arrival of the wise men on January 6th. In the broader culture epiphanies are those wonderful “aha!” moments where everything just seems to fall into place. But in fact, there are all sorts of epiphanies. They are not limited to either deities arriving in infant human form or having more usual moments of insight during more ordinary circumstances. At its core, experiencing an epiphany is having a moment of revelation. The terms “epiphany;” “revelation” and “unveiling” can all be understood pretty much interchangeably. The final book of the Bible *Revelation* could well have been named *Epiphany*; or we could just as easily call the day when the Magi arrived to pay Jesus homage *Revelation*.

So, really the Bible is full of epiphanies...which is where the third reading comes in. It is traditionally ascribed to Paul, and it certainly relies on Paul's story. It reads in part: “For surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by *revelation*...”¹ Paul calls his epiphany a revelation. He is referring to his adventure on the road to Damascus. You remember the story, right? Paul was a zealous Jew and he defended the Jewish faith as he knew it. He even went out of his way to oppress people who thought differently. So, naturally, when an upstart community got going in Damascus, Paul headed right there to crack down on it. They were saying all sorts of nutty things about how *Judaism had been forever **changed*** by the ministry, life, death and supposed resurrection of one Jewish man named Jesus, whom they also called Messiah or Christ. They had the gall to say that somehow this man was also God at the same time, which was outright blasphemy to Paul. So, he took off to set them on the right path.

¹ Ephesians 3:2-3b.

And on the way, everything changed. He was struck blind. Jesus—present in a disembodied voice--asked Paul why he was oppressing him. Eventually, following some prayer and fasting, Paul had a change of heart, and came to believe in Christianity and devote his life to proclaiming the resurrection not only to his fellow Jews, but also to the Gentiles—all the non-Jews who lived in the lands where he preached. It is a pretty powerful story. Especially when we consider that before his conversion to Christianity, Paul would have kept his distance from Gentiles. He would not have associated with them, much less preached to them. Without his epiphany, it would have been inconceivable for Paul to believe or proclaim that, with his fellow Jewish Christians “Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”² Yet Paul distinguishes himself in his career precisely as the Apostle to the Gentiles. He seeks out people he would have once considered despicable to bring them the good news of Christ, and to welcome them into being church with him. When Christ was revealed to him, Paul was motivated to bring people together, to cross borders and to widen God’s community on earth. Paul’s epiphany motivated him to sow the seeds of community in the world.

That was a good epiphany to have! More often than not the epiphanies I have are passing moments of realization—little luminous moments that shine and glimmer and then fade way into fond memory. Which is precisely what I fear the celebration of Epiphany tends to be in the life of the church—a passing wonder, a bright blip to end Christmastide before we go back to business as usual. Now, please don’t mishear me. I am not speaking specifically of *this* church per se, because as I hope you know well already, I love us. But as a wider church; in Christianity in its broadest expressions, we rush right through Epiphany and go back to the green liturgical season, which is usually given the horrid title of... “*Ordinary Time.*” I think Eeyore must have named that season! Could there be anything less inspiring? Another way to call it is “The Season After Epiphany,” which is at least a little better, because it directs us to consider something important: what comes *after the epiphany*? What keeps it from being just a bright and cozy memory? What makes it a moment of transformation like Paul’s epiphany on the way to Damascus?

I think the answer is two-fold: the presence of Christ, and how we respond. The epiphanies we have in our non-church life tend to come and go. But this morning’s readings are all retellings of, or reactions to, encounters with the Living, still-speaking God made known to us, and the

² Ephesians 3:6

world, in Jesus Christ. Just as Paul's life is utterly transformed by his encounter, so too are the people in the other stories. The Magi had two epiphanies of Jesus. The first revelation of Jesus came through their knowledge of the stars. The very cosmos unveiled Jesus for them. They had determined that something amazing was going to happen through Christ's life, and that distant epiphany invited a closer one.

Following a long journey, the Magi laid treasures of great value at his feet, each of which carried symbolic value, too. Gold to represent Christ's right to rule as a King, which he forsook in his ministry of non-violence; frankincense to indicate the divine nature of Jesus, since it was used in temples throughout the world; and the embalming compound myrrh to foreshadow that, *even in his crib*, Jesus was destined to die early.

Another notable feature of the Magi is that they were Gentiles. Christ's work of reconciling Jews and Gentiles—so beautifully demonstrated in the work of Paul—began at the moment of his Incarnation.

Rounding out the Jewish side of that reconciling work were the first epiphanies of Jesus to the shepherds. They also had two Epiphanies of Christ—first through the proclamation of an angel who was shortly joined by an entire angelic choir, and then through seeing the babe in the manger. The more distant epiphany led to a closer one. Like Paul, they were moved to proclaim their encounter. The Gospel of Luke says that the shepherds “made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”³ Typically the shepherds of Jesus' day were people who lived in the remote fringes of society. Yet their epiphany of Jesus Christ motivated them to come out of their usual seclusion to share the good news.

The diversity of characters having epiphanies in the Bible stories illustrates that every one of us is invited to take part in the story. As twenty-first century people it is arguable that we have been given many opportunities to have epiphanies. Scripture itself is a library of them, and ready for us to peruse at any time. History is full of moments of life changing epiphanies as well. And many of us probably have our own stories or epiphany, revelation or unveiling when we suddenly realized God was in our midst. So, what do we do now?

³ Luke 2:17-17.

As Christians, what do we do after the epiphany? As we put away the figurines of the Magi, and pack up the strings of lights, what change will remain in our hearts and inform our actions? Will we follow Paul and dedicate our lives to changing and reconciling the world? That is certainly part of why we gather here each week, to continue that mission to one another and the world. Will we offer treasures to Jesus, or to the work of Jesus? Without your weekly contributions of time, talents and tithes this building and all our committees would quickly fall apart. Will we make known all that has been told to us about Jesus and risk stepping outside of our usual comfort zones like the shepherds did? Each time we share our faith, or better yet, live it out, we do just that.

All the responses to epiphanies we heard of in this morning's readings are aspects of being disciples of Christ. After the Epiphany comes discipleship. Not just a mad dash back to business as usual, but to a life transformed into a deep and enduring discipleship. And discipleship involves commitment to our vision of a better world through following Jesus even in the mucky parts of winter when our spirits are low and the roads are icy. Discipleship involves spreading the word even outside of our comfort zone, and dedicating ourselves to Christ's reconciling work come what may. Discipleship is a response to those moments of illumination where we realize God is among us that inspire us to kindle more sacred fires in the hearts of our sisters and brothers in the world, with God's help and guidance. May we all be worthy of this work. May we all be up to the task. May we all be joyful in seeing it through till Christ returns among us.

Amen.

Matthew 2:7-11

7Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Luke 2:8-18

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” 15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Ephesians 3:1-6

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— 2for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, 3and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Ref. Acts 9:1-22