

EPIPHANY – THE STILL SMALL VOICE

(02/12/2023)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 19:1-12
Isaiah 6:1-8
Matthew 2:1-12; 3:13-17

“ . . . and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”
(1 Kings 19:11-12)

Today is the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany. The liturgical season of Epiphany is a time when the church celebrates the visit of the Magi to the manger; Jesus’ baptism; Jesus’ first miracle, the changing of the water to wine at the wedding reception he attended in Cana; and his feeding of the five thousand.

This morning, in addition to a passage from 1 Kings and one from Isaiah, we listened once again to the scriptural accounts of the visit of the Magi and Jesus’ baptism. Each of these texts has something to teach us about the nature of religious experience. Though the historical events that we celebrate on Epiphany are important, it is more important to understand what an epiphany is and to ask whether we have ever had one. I hope we will be surprised by our answer! We will--if our answer is shaped by the passage from 1 Kings.

Let’s begin with the day itself. Epiphany, also known as Twelfth Night, is observed on January 6, the twelfth night after Christmas. In some cultures, or religious traditions, Twelfth Night is celebrated by the sharing of gifts. The year we lived in Germany, while I was studying at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland, children would come to the door of our apartment dressed up as the Magi and sing Epiphany hymns in exchange for candy or other sweets--sort of a combination of Christmas and Halloween.

The number twelve is a highly symbolic number. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, there were twelve sons of Jacob, twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve disciples. When Judas died by his own hand following the crucifixion, the remaining disciples voted in a new member of the inner circle, Matthias, to bring the number back to twelve. So, the number twelve must, on some deep archetypal level, signify or symbolize wholeness. There are twelve signs in the zodiac and twelve months in the year. Twelve was Tom Brady’s number, if you still care, if you are caught up in the retirement drama. Apparently, we do care, because the status of Tom’s relationship with the Patriots is front-page news in the Globe, while an update on Reina Carolina Morales Rojas is nowhere to be found.

By the way, how many people here this morning know who Ms. Rojas is? I thought so. Not very many. Reina, a beautiful young woman from East Boston, mysteriously “went

missing” from Somerville on the evening of November 26, 2022. Since then, she has not been in contact with her sister or her two children, who live in El Salvador. A public alert about her disappearance was not issued until January 12, more than a month later, and follow-up by the Boston Police Department has been spotty at best. The police told Reina’s sister that they are waiting until she returns home to find out from her what happened. It doesn’t take a rocket surgeon to realize that this is an unlikely scenario.

I wonder why we don’t recognize her name, and why her disappearance hasn’t been in the news. Could it be because she lives in East Boston, a community with a large immigrant population? When women from towns like Duxbury or Weston or Wellesley go missing, there is a nationwide search. Could it be her name: Reina Carolina Morales Rojas? (Forgive my pronunciation; I never studied Spanish.) Her children constantly ask their aunt, “donde está mi mama?!” I wonder why we haven’t heard more about her abduction.

But I digress. That’s not the point. The point is that the completion of the Christmas story, the visit of the Magi to the manger, *had* to take place twelve nights after the birth.

What I didn’t realize until a few weeks ago, when I read, for the hundredth time, the account of the visit of the Magi to the manger, was that the Magi were not Jewish. I mean, I sort of knew they weren’t Jewish. I just never realized the significance of that fact.

Jesus was Jewish both in culture and religion. Mary and Joseph, who was of the house and lineage of King David, were both Jewish. The shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks by night were Jewish. Everyone who saw, who witnessed the birth of Jesus, the one whom we proclaim to be the Christ, the son of the living god, was Jewish.

Except the wise men. The wise men were “from the East.” They were oriental (if we are still allowed to use that term). They may have been Persian astrologers, adherents of the Manichean faith. They were not Jewish. They found Jesus by “following the star.”

The realization that the wise men were not Jewish, yet they came to worship the infant in the manger, raises the question of whether we should regard Jesus as the Messiah, the one for whom his people longed, the one who would free them from the oppressive grip of their Roman overseers, a religious and military leader after the fashion of his ancestor, King David. Was Jesus really “The King of the Jews?” Or was Jesus more than this?

I am not convinced that the terms “Messiah” and “Christ” are identical, though many translations of the Bible seem to assume this. I think “Christ” is a bigger term, a title that does

not limit Jesus to the fulfillment of a political-religious function within a specific nation. I don't think of Jesus as the Messiah; I think of him as the Christ.

In the days of the early church, there was a debate over whether the followers of Jesus were simply reformed Jews, or whether Christianity was a separate and different religion. Peter believed converts should become Jews first and then be baptized as Christians. Paul, whose ministry was to the Gentiles, believed people of any religious background or no religious background could become Christians. By the way, Gentile just means non-Jew. Gentiles are not people from some specific country, the country of Gentile. Paul won the debate.

The Magi were thus the first of the Gentiles, the non-Jews, to recognize that the human Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the son of the living God, the Word of God made flesh. So, Matthew, and Matthew alone, inserted this legend into his gospel, presumably to address a debate that was taking place in his church about whether Jesus' message was for the Jews or for everyone, whether Jesus was the savior of just the Jews or everyone.

Let's return to the root meaning of the word "epiphany." Epiphany means to make known, to make manifest, to show forth. An epiphany is a moment of realization, a "eureka" moment when something is suddenly made clear. It comes from the Greek word for manifestation or appearance.

When Mary was visited by the angel who told her she would bear a special son, that experience would qualify as an epiphany. When the shepherds followed the angel and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger, that was an epiphany. When the Magi followed the star to Bethlehem only to discover that this great event which was heralded throughout the universe was nothing more than the birth of a vulnerable little child, that was an epiphany. These people saw what others didn't see; they realized what others didn't realize. These people recognized Jesus for who he was: the Christ, the Word of God made flesh.

I think of an epiphany as a religious experience. A religious experience is an experience of something breaking through from the "other side," an experience of the transcendent intersecting with the immanent, with the world of space and time, an experience of presence. It is the feeling, the realization that God is speaking to you, challenging you, comforting you, guiding you in some way. An epiphany may come in church during a worship service. It may come from the experience of a sunset, a starry night, a falling leaf, or when we listen to a symphony. It may come when we feel that love which is at the core of our being and should be at the core of all our relationships. It is an experiential insight, an awareness that is more than an awareness. It can be thought of as the reception, the experience of God's self-revelation.

A religious experience, an epiphany, always produces a change in a person's life. Or it should produce a change. The Greek word that is used to describe this change is *metanoia*. Your life should not be the same after an epiphany as before. If it is, you did not experience an epiphany. If you recall, in T. S. Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi," the Magi were changed by their experience. It was a kind of death for them. As one of the wise men, looking back on their experience many years later, tells us,

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

The change that takes place during or following an epiphany may be dramatic, like what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. It may be a dramatic change like what happened to Isaiah after his powerful experience in the temple. The experience of Jesus' baptism, which we also celebrate during Epiphany, was a big religious experience, a true epiphany. Jesus saw the heavens open, and he heard the voice of God blessing him. From that point on, his life was totally changed. These are big epiphanies, big religious experiences. When people have the experience of being born again, when they turn their lives around, when they decide to build their lives around Christ rather than themselves or some other idol, this would qualify as a big religious experience.

You may have had an experience like Saul's, like Isaiah's. Then again, you may not. However, you may have had numerous smaller epiphanies, smaller religious experiences. The psychologist of religion William James tells us that whether we have a big religious experience or a smaller one depends upon our psychology, our personality. James tells us that some kinds of personalities, some kinds of people have one or a few big experiences, and other kinds of people have many smaller experiences. He describes the former as twice born (or born again), and the latter as once born.

This morning, I want us to think about not only the big epiphanies we have had, the ones that dramatically changed our lives, but the many little ones we may have in worship, in prayer, in our daily lives. Because these are epiphanies, too! They are religious experiences,

realizations that there is more to life than the here and now, more to life than us. These epiphanies can change our lives in small but important ways if we give them a place in our hearts.

In the passage from 1 Kings that we heard this morning, Elijah has just won his contest with the priests of Baal. In response to Elijah's request, God sends a fire down from heaven to burn up his sacrifice, whereas the sacrifice that was offered to Baal was not consumed. This demonstration of Yahweh's power was followed by Elijah's slaughter of four hundred fifty priests of Baal.

The wicked queen Jezebel, understandably, took offense at the slaughter of her priests. She vowed to do the same to Elijah. Afraid for his life, Elijah ran away. While he was hiding in a cave, the Lord came to him. As we read,

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

An alternative translation of "a sound of sheer silence" is "a still, small voice." I like both translations. I like "a still, small voice" because it is relational. I like "a sound of sheer silence" because it reminds us of the power of silence—if we make room for silence in our lives. I believe that this is the only place in scripture where God speaks in a still, small voice. Throughout the Bible, God speaks in many ways. He spoke through the plagues he inflicted upon the Egyptians, and the famines that he brought upon the land. Job 38.1 tells us that Job experienced God in a whirlwind. Psalm 77:14 describes God as speaking through thunder. And Revelation 4:5 tells us how God will speak through fire at the time of the Second Coming.

However, God was not in the wind; God was not in the earthquake; and God was not in the fire. God was in "the sound of sheer silence." God spoke to Elijah in a still, small voice.

Our experience of God is not always accompanied by dramatic events or revelations or manifestations. God can speak to us in a still, small voice. God influences, guides our life not by might, by power, but by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel speaks to us in a gentle voice. Jesus gently speaks to us in the voice of love, grace, mercy, peace, pardon, and compassion. This is the power that breaks the rock apart; this is what dissolves or softens a heart of stone. Jesus gently conquers our hearts.

That special feeling you might have during some parts of our worship service, hopefully at least occasionally during the sermon, in your own prayer, when you are struck with the beauty

of nature, and in your daily life, that feeling, that experience of presence, that faint stirring—that is God speaking to you, God reaching out to you, God touching you in some way. These experiences help to close the unfortunate gap we have created in our minds between God and us. The realization of God’s presence is an epiphany. As Mitchell Hilbert said in one of our confirmation classes approximately seventeen years ago, the experience of God speaking to us or touching us during a service of worship “is like the experience of having an emptiness filled.” How’s that for a description of an epiphany?

Think of all the ways we might be touched by our worship service: by the prayers, the hymns, the reading of scripture, the sermon, even the symbols that are present in our sanctuary. God speaks to us; God calls us through these symbols, through the words of our hymns, through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. If we open our hearts and our minds to Jesus when we talk to him, we may experience those many little epiphanies that can dramatically change our lives.

Yes, Epiphany is a Christian festival. It is a time when we remember and celebrate the changing of the water to wine, the feeding of the five thousand, the visit of the Magi, and the event of Jesus’ baptism. These all had to do with change, with transformation, transformations that involved a kind of death. It is also a time for us to remember, to claim, our own epiphanies, those moments when we felt God’s presence, when, in the words of John Wesley, we “felt our heart strangely warmed.” Our epiphanies, whether they were big ones like Isaiah’s, Saul’s, or the epiphany of Jesus at the time of his baptism, or the smaller ones like that experienced by Elijah and the Magi, are important parts of our own religious experience, our own spiritual journey.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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(An audio version of this sermon will be available later in the week through our church website.)