

If Only We Would -- Epiphany 1A

Epiphany is not only a funny sounding word, folks can't quite agree on what it signifies. Christians have used this time to mark a variety of significant landmarks along each year's journey, among them *Twelfthide*, a post-Christmas feasting season when folks were meant to get the last of their jollies out before Lent; kind of like a monthlong Mardi Gras.

We also celebrate the "Adoration of the Magi," when the three wise fellows or kings came to Bethlehem to visit Jesus in infancy. They had what's called a theophany, wherein God's self becomes apparent. Some stunning storm of their every sense rose and broke, sending light and recognition and love through them like lightning. They knew they were in the presence of the living God. Epiphany as theophany. Kind of like when we hold our first baby, or grandbaby, or taste Gran Marnier soufflé.

That's why they made up the story of Herod trying to do away with Jesus by killing all the infants: to say that anyone who is afraid of or otherwise ill-disposed toward the baby Jesus is attacking God's very self in each of ourselves.

Epiphany is the baptismal Feast of Feasts because when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by his

cousin John, “Just as he came up from the water, the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove to alight on him. And there came a voice from heaven: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” That made God plenty apparent to everyone there.

In Eastern Christian traditions the most resonant events of the church year are Epiphany (baptism), Easter (the overcoming of death) and Pentecost (the presence of the spirit of God in each of us). In the West, we have mostly talked about the Epiphany as the time when God went from being a far away, mysterious concept to a very real and present companion to our lives – as the hymn goes, “...God in man made manifest.” But Western Christians of every stripe have experienced a waning passion for this feast and its meaning, that has led to negligence of liturgical practice and education, thus snowballing the decline of Epiphany-centered music, liturgy, prayer and preaching.

One dictionary calls epiphany, “An intuitive grasp of reality achieved in a flash of recognition,” or as the great James Joyce described it, a time when a thing’s “soul, its whatness leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance.” So what is the ‘whatness’ of this day? The spirit, the *Pneuma* in Greek is like the wind, blowing into the world and into our very selves. In Latin, *Spiritus*, in Old English *Gast*, as in ghost all attempt to

describe what we are aware of but cannot see. The Hebrew concept of God has always been based on the flow of an invisible force of life that flows in and out of us. The word for spirit is *Ruah*, which, when you say it, is like breathing: out and in, *ru-ah, ru-ah*, just as to say the name of God is to breathe in and out – *ya-weh, ya-weh*. So part of the whatness of today is to discipline ourselves to remain aware that God is in every life-sustaining breath we take.

The other part of today's whatness is to celebrate the rite of baptism itself. In Greek the word *bapto* meant to dip, like a donut or an oreo. A more intense form of the word would be *baptizo*, which meant a full immersion. Other meanings included to wash, plunge, sink, drench and overwhelm. Other words from the same root included *baptisma*, a ritual washing, *baptismos*, regular washing, as of ourselves or our dishes, and *baptistes*, a baptizer like John. For the ancient Hebrews, there was much emphasis on purity and purification. For example, the ones performing the yearly ritual of taking a scapegoat into the wilderness each year in order to purge the sins of the community were required to have a ritual washing before they could rejoin the community. I guess nobody thought of just washing the goat instead.

And for Isaiah, this kind of transformation was undergone by the entire nation at once in getting out of Egypt. The experience of being exiled and brought home

safely through the waters of the sea was a purification and preparation for a new life as the servants and messengers of the Spirit of God. One big mass baptism.

Because of this, nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. They all gather, they come to you; then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice

Our own exile might be literal like that, but more likely, figurative. We might at times – or all the time -- experience separation from what seems good and right and feel an exile of unhappiness or fear: the slow acid agony of resentment or the cold grey numbness of loneliness and regret. All these are known as impurities, sin, possession by the devil. Call them what you will, these moral, ethical and psychological forms of exile all entail and thrive on a dearth of the spirit of God: with nothing to ground us.

As was foretold by the prophet, in the servant songs of Isaiah, God has anointed Israel by filling them with spirit: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” This is what the psalmist celebrates too, in the voice of the Lord breaking into our lives to spiritualize us, the heavens opened and ourselves emergent from our baptism with new identities: beloved children of God. Then with us is God pleased. Usually. For the role of

the Good People as spiritual servants is an extension and embodiment of God's intention in the World: to establish justice and peace. That is the vocation of the entire nation. That is our whatness, if only we would embrace it.

Peter describes what happened to Jesus: "Anointed with power, Jesus went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the Devil as he could." Because we are a community framed by baptism, and also commissioned to baptize, (this community is the body of Christ), because that is our whatness, whether we see ourselves as rescued from the depths, or more simply given gentle prodding and a mysterious inclination to care, we too are anointed with power and must go about doing good and healing all who are oppressed by the Devil. If only we would pick up our wooden stakes and silver crosses, our kind hearts and our coronets and go.

Our redemptive commission as baptized people means that whatever we think about the perfection of God, whatever we think about our relation to God's image, we can in our own ways live into a likeness to God. It is at once our great gift and great obligation; as Jesus did, so must we try to do. That's the significance of Epiphany; that is our solemn vow and our sacred privilege. Indeed, that is our way of life, if only we would live it.