

Epiphany and epiphanies

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Scripture: Isaiah 60: 1-6 and Matthew 2: 1-12

Epiphany is traditionally celebrated on January 6, but many churches, including ours, do so on the first Sunday in January. Epiphany comes from a Greek word that means a manifestation or appearance. In ancient Greek culture, the term was used to describe the dawn, or the appearance of an enemy in battle, or the sighting of a god. In Christian tradition, epiphany means the appearance or revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The Church sees Epiphany in three different events. In Western Christianity, it was a feast to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and it concentrated on the visit of the Magi, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

In Eastern Christianity, including today's Orthodox Church, Epiphany commemorates two other events: Jesus's baptism, when John recognizes Jesus's identity, and Jesus's first miracle or "sign," as described in the Gospel of John: the changing of water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana. Epiphany is a very big deal in Eastern Christianity, celebrated with many rituals and customs, such as performing baptisms on this day, blessings of bodies of water, and eating cakes into which have been baked a bean or coin or other surprise.

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We have come to use the word "epiphany" metaphorically to describe a sudden insight or discovery or recognition. What have been the epiphanies in your life? It might be realizing that you have a special gift or calling, something that gives your life purpose and direction. Perhaps it is recognizing that you love someone and want to share a life together. It may be an epiphany to suddenly

appreciate some way in which your life has been blessed. Or you see that God has been present, grace has come your way, through another person's forgiveness or steady love. Maybe it is an epiphany to realize that Christ is present in the needy neighbor, the recent immigrant who needs help, or the suffering of someone you know. Suddenly you get it. You wake up. Something happens that manifests or discloses the nature of God and how God is present in your life.

Is there such a thing as a negative epiphany? Is that the right word for a disclosure of something terrible that seems to show God as not present? As of 2020, the traditional date of Epiphany, January 6, is stamped in our minds with the traumatic events in our nation's capital on that day. The violence and rage on display in that riot and insurrection threatened the very survival of our nation. Yet even in a negative event like this, there can be a sudden disclosure of meaning, such as waking up to the fragility and preciousness of something we care deeply about but took for granted. Sometimes what is revealed in the darkness is the need for hope, for our response, and for trust in God's continuing work and ultimate redemption. Early Christians sometimes used the word "epiphany" to refer to a future event, resurrection or the Second Coming.

An epiphany has several paradoxical qualities. It comes as an unexpected surprise, an "aha!" moment. But it's also something that we may have anticipated,

searched for, and worked towards. We wanted something like this, but still, it blows our mind. For me, this combination of qualities was what I experienced when my children and grandchildren were born. I knew, or hoped, that I would welcome a new life. But, as one friend described her experience of seeing her newborn, it felt like this: “We didn’t know it was YOU!” Wow! You, with all your amazingly unique gestures and gazes and gurgles. You, this particular, precious person who continues to surprise and delight, even decades later. An epiphany is what you were looking for, but without realizing it. You never knew it would come in just this form, right here, right now. It’s like the relationship between the two scriptural passages for today: the verses from Isaiah prophecy a future redemption for Israel, but Jesus’s birth fulfills that prophecy in an unexpected way that radically changes the meaning of what it means to be the Christ, “the anointed one.” When wise men, the Magis, come looking for “the king of the Jews,” they find a baby in a manger and a humble family who will soon be refugees from Herod’s persecution. An epiphany is both the fulfillment of expectations and the sudden disclosure of more meaning, goodness, and blessing than you ever imagined.

Epiphany has inspired a lot of art, music, and literature. Let me use one example to explore another crucial dimension of Epiphany. I’ll read T. S. Eliot’s

poem “The Journey of the Magi,” and you can follow along in the copy printed in today’s bulletin.

The Journey of the Magi

A cold coming we had of it,
 Just the worst time of the year
 For a journey, and such a long journey:
 The ways deep and the weather sharp,
 The very dead of winter.'
 And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
 Lying down in the melting snow.
 There were times we regretted
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
 Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
 and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
 And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
 A hard time we had of it.
 At the end we preferred to travel all night,
 Sleeping in snatches,
 With the voices singing in our ears, saying
 That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
 Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
 With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
 And three trees on the low sky,
 And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
 Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
 Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
 And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
 But there was no information, and so we continued
 And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
 Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

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.

There is a lot to say about this poem, but I will focus only on the surprising ending. The Wise Man asks: “Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?” With the allusion to three trees in the low sky, this celebration of the birth of the Christ child suddenly turns towards the Crucifixion. We leave the world of Christmas presents and rejoicing to be reminded of where this child’s life is heading: towards a violent and humiliating death and the apparent failure of God’s purposes. The ending also refers to another death: “This Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.” This Magi sense the end of his old way of life, with its summer palaces, silken girls, and ostentatious consumption and sensuality.

T. S. Eliot wrote this poem shortly after his conversion. I think he is pointing to the hard work and struggle that come *after* conversion, and *after* Epiphany. He speaks of his discomfort, even distress: “We returned to our places, these kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods.” After the mountain top experience, you must come

down. You have to live in the world, which hasn't changed much. It's often not easy to know how to do that. There may be times of uncertainty, ambivalence, and regret. Still, an epiphany gives guidance, a suggestion of what is possible, a glimpse of a deeper meaning and purpose for our lives.

In this poem, then, Eliot ties the meaning of Epiphany to the process of conversion, which can climax in a sudden revelation but usually involves a lot of effort leading up to it and continuing work to really transform one's life. After their long and difficult trek to find the Christ child, the Magi still had a long journey ahead of them. Not only their geographical travel back home, but an ongoing journey in time, as they try to understand and live out the full meaning of what was revealed to them.

This Epiphany Sunday falls on New Year's Day, a time of new beginnings. Think about your own journey through time, both your ongoing, uncompleted conversion and your sense, sometimes, of starting over after a startling event or insight. What epiphanies have you witnessed, that you must try to integrate into your way of life? What epiphanies will you expect and look for this year, 2023? What star will you follow? And how will you try to be open to what may surprise you and transform you beyond your wildest imagination? May God be manifested for us in new ways this year. May God support and guide us as we try to be faithful to epiphanies past and future. Amen.