

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



## “Five Epiphanies”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Second Sunday after Christmas (Year C)

January 3, 2016

Isaiah 60:1–6 ; Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14; Ephesians 3:1–2; Matthew 2:1–12

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Before his death in 1903, the artist Paul Gauguin painted a beautiful picture  
of the nativity known as *Christmas Night (The Blessing of the Oxen)*.

I saw the picture in a medical journal before Christmas,  
and it struck me as a depiction of the Epiphany with many of the same  
elements as the one in Matthew with the magi.

(*JAMA*, December 22/29, 2015. Volume 314, Number 24, p. 2602).

Gauguin painted the scene towards the end of his life, having left his home in France  
for the simpler lifestyle of Tahiti, and then from there  
for the even more remote Marqueses Islands.

He was withdrawing further and further from the civilized world,  
struggling with the complications of a tumultuous life and lifestyle  
with the illnesses and pain of old age,  
with the loss of a child and a failed marriage,  
perhaps with a total faith crisis, which drove him to declare,  
“My daughter is dead, now I don’t need God.”

Out of that context, Gauguin painted this beautiful Epiphany dreamscape  
fusing many cultures: with the steeples and snow-covered thatched cottages

of France's Brittany in the background,  
with women wearing dark headdresses characteristic of the Middle East  
moving like the magi towards the darkened manger in the foreground,  
with two oxen suggestive of Egyptian motifs plodding their way  
towards the crèche in ancient serenity and wonder.

And on the wintry horizon, a rosy dawn begins to break and clouds swirl  
as if some new cosmic energy were unleashed with this event  
that cuts across cultural lines and breathes newness  
into heaven, earth and all of creation, and perhaps, even into the artist.

Out of his deep crisis, on the edge of his despair, in denial of faith,  
Gauguin's *Epiphany* was born on oil and canvas as he tried  
to make meaning of his complicated and messy life.

Perhaps our epiphanies happen this way as well, if we are honest with ourselves.

epiphany with a little "e" in the Merriam Webster world  
means a sudden "ah ha" of the essential nature or meaning of something;  
an illuminating discovery, realization or disclosure;  
a revealing scene or moment that can be either beneficial or detrimental.

In the sacred sense, epiphany connotes a manifestation or revelation.

Epiphany, with a capital "E" is also a liturgical holy day and season  
of the church year, older than Advent, Lent, or Christmas,  
which commemorates *the manifestation of Jesus as God's son*  
through his birth, his visitation by the gentile magi,  
his childhood, his baptism and his miracles, beginning with the  
wedding at Cana water-to-wine miracle.

The earliest reference to Epiphany as a Christian feast was in 361 CE,

when it was celebrated on January 6, then claimed to be Christ's  
birthday and also the day on which the miracle at Cana occurred.

An epiphany to me is an ah ha moment, one that draws my breath up short,  
dilates my pupils, raises my blood pressure, and elevates my sense  
of "could it be?"

Epiphanies, I want to suggest, can come out of crises of life and faith  
as meaningful resolutions that can to give us insight and hope, but not always.

For the roving magi from the east, we can only guess at their initial crisis.

Perhaps their alleged Persian roots in Zoroastrianism,  
in astronomy and magic were not holding water for them.

Perhaps they were wiser than that, and so they sacrificed life and limb  
on the basis of a rumor and a star  
to make a pilgrimage into another faith tradition to see what  
promise it held. Could it be?

This is why I like to take our confirmation classes to visit other faith communities  
and places of worship. It helps define our faith by finding similarities  
and differences among our ecumenical friends.

This is why I hope many of us will respond to the invitation of the Masjid  
in Parkwood on Saturday and join our Muslim friends there.

It helps place us in God's greater scheme for loving the world beyond us.

And sometimes we don't appreciate what our faith tradition means to us  
until we juxtapose it with another faith tradition and ask essential questions:

- Is there another to be born King of the Jews?
- Where is this child to be born?
- Is it possible to find him and worship him from another faith tradition?

- Would he be amenable to that? Is faith that elastic?

I wonder what epiphanies the magi had when they arrived back home,  
safe and alive.

I wonder if they were moved or changed by what they had experienced,  
or not moved at all?

For Herod the Great, the sitting King of Judea from 37 BCE until just after  
Jesus' birth, his faith crisis seems to be his debilitating paranoia.

He has previously ordered three of his sons to be strangled on suspicion of conspiracy;  
likewise, one of his wives, and now having taken care of internal threats,  
he has these meddling magi in search of a would-be king to trouble him.

Could it be?

In his striving for recognition, Herod has made a name for himself as the  
greatest builder in Jewish history with the crown jewel of his efforts  
being the expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem as a  
magnificent edifice for worship.

Could it be... that he is not Lord of the Temple that he has worked so hard to build?

Could it be... that threat to his power will not come from within his family  
but from outside, even from a child?

King Herod stands at a potential point of grace in his meeting with the magi,  
and certainly he is moved and changed by the encounter.

But his epiphany, it seems, results only in rage,

for in one last fit of furor, he is the one who will order the murder  
of all innocent little boys under the age of two around Bethlehem.

And lastly, there are those chief priests and teachers of the law

who have total recall of the scripture and apparently  
can cough up ancient prophecies about the Messiah upon demand.  
Could it be... that this is the One who will shepherd the people of Israel,  
as the prophet Micah projected?  
Søren Kierkegaard suggests that these Jewish pundits  
had all the knowledge they needed to recognize the Messiah in their midst,  
and yet their crisis is that they are unmoved to act upon their knowledge.  
And so they keep quiet and stay put.

And perhaps their epiphany in this encounter is one of regret,  
that they knew all of the signs by heart, but when the stars actually lined up,  
they failed to look up from their studies, leave their books  
and follow the magi in order to find the true object of their devotion.

(Søren Kierkegaard. "Only a Rumor." *Watch for the Light*, p. 286)

Perhaps these people all had simultaneous ah has of revelation, rage, or regret.  
Epiphanies can take many shapes or forms, it seems.

Before Christmas, my husband and I happened to sit at a restaurant dinner table  
next to another couple who had a head start on us with their libations  
and, shall we say, were primed to talk.

So we introduced ourselves to one another: he was a retired neonatologist,  
she a hospital social worker, and we, two Christmas-weary preachers,  
not really wanting to talk about church.

He, however, wasted no time in announcing to us that he was an atheist,  
born and bred as Episcopalian but long grown skeptical of all that "bunk."  
She, he said, kept him in good standing in the Methodist Church,  
where she, his wife, practiced her faith.

It didn't really matter to us what faith they practiced; we were just ready to order our food and not talk church for a while. But that was not to be. He started with his accolades as a physician: his career, his accomplishments, quite proud of all he had done on behalf of the most compromised babies. It was obvious that he liked to talk, that he liked to talk about himself, and that the wine was doing some of the talking.

"I have found it easier," he said, "to practice medicine as an atheist. It keeps religion from getting in the way of my care of the children and their families." He was all puff and posturing.

But then something changed in his demeanor, and his voice dropped to a whisper as he leaned closer to us so we had to strain to hear:

"But there are still some things that I just can't explain, and I don't know what to do with that."

And he went on to tell us about the time a nurse called him to a little girl's room, telling him that the child said to hurry because the angels were coming.

And when he arrived at the room, the child unexpectedly had died.

He said he never could understand that one.

Or the one about the little baby certain to die, engulfed in a prayer circle of family and friends, led by a fiery Baptist minister.

And she didn't—this one didn't die.

He said he never understood that one either.

And then his color came up and his eyes became moist, and he said,

"I hope that God gives me credit for all the lives I have saved instead of demerits for my inability to believe what I don't understand."

The avowed atheist said that!

Hedge and I thought a lot about that conversation in the days that followed,  
and we decided that what we had witnessed at dinner that night  
was an “unfaith story,” and it was about as raw and honest and authentic  
as any faith story we’ve ever heard.

Maybe we should be encouraging each other to tell our unfaith stories  
as a way of attesting to the points of grace in all of our lives  
that can lead to epiphanies or ah has of revelation, rage or regret.

Maybe that’s where epiphanies make their nests:

in the gaps in our faith, in crevasses of our crises, in the cradles of our doubt.

And maybe God in Christ is being made manifest even now

in the rubble of the tornadoes, in the sandbagging around the floods,  
in the unrest of our inner cities, in the inequities of our justice system,  
in the aftermath of a drive-by murder of an innocent toddler  
as well as in the great global migrations of people.

Maybe there in these crises, we will see the rising Sun of our hope and our  
meaning-maker, Jesus the Christ, and wonder... could it be true?

And maybe we will look up at the stars, listen to our dreams,

leave the comfort of our books,  
whisper to someone our deepest revelations, rage and regrets,  
and be moved to venture forward in the wintry darkness  
to seek after him in the New Year. Amen.