

A sermon preached on Epiphany Sunday, January 7, 2024
 at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton
 Isaiah 60:1-6. Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14. Ephesians 3:1-12. Matthew 2:1-12

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Have you experienced any epiphanies recently?

Epiphany is a Greek word which means shining forth or manifestation, or an illuminating insight, discovery, or realization. We all have both little and big epiphanies throughout our lives. We have little epiphanies, like when I discovered a faster way to make steel cut oatmeal in the morning. We all have some big epiphany insights, like when it is time to change jobs or retire. The epiphany or insight may come from within ourselves, it may come from our life situation or the people around us. Epiphanies can be welcomed or ignored or resisted. And there are often divine elements to epiphanies.

God usually initiates the changes in our lives and our relationship with God through epiphany experiences and our responses to them. The epiphany moment usually jolts us, makes us feel uncomfortable, like a surprise invitation to take a new job in a new place, or the loss of a job. The epiphany might be an accident, a heart attack or cancer which invite us into a major life change. It might be something that happens in the community around us or the sickness of someone close to us or an urgent inner sense that we need to do something about a particular situation.

In today's gospel, God's Epiphany came to the whole world through a bright new star which was noticed by some astrologer/priests, perhaps in Persia. They asked themselves: what does this new star mean? Somehow, they had an inner insight that this star meant that a baby had been born who would be King of the Jews. So, they brought expensive gifts for this extraordinary baby: gold for a king, incense for a divine person and myrrh because he would end up dying as part of his life mission. They took the risk of letting the star guide them. On their long journey, the star led them to Jerusalem, but they were not sure just where the child might be. So, they went to King Herod and asked if he knew where the new king of the Jews had been born.

Herod appeared strong and kingly on the outside, but inwardly, this news from these strange visitors from another country was very threatening to him. Herod was a cruel, narcissistic leader who had a habit of killing anyone he thought might be trying to take over his throne. He killed several members of his family, including his wife, because he thought they might be trying to get rid of him. Herod asked the Jewish religious leaders where the Messiah, the King God would send from heaven to rule the Jews and the world, would be born. They answered, in Bethlehem, quoting from the prophet Micah. So Herod passed the message on the visitors and told them to report back to him when they found the baby who would be king of the Jews.

We know the story, so we are not surprised by all this. But Mathew, the only gospel writer who tells the story of the wisemen, is writing to Jewish people who are curious about Jesus. What is shocking about this story is that the wise men were from a pagan country, a different race and religion and language. This was scandalous to Jewish teaching. They were confident that the Messiah would come from their country to save the Jewish people. The religious leaders thought they knew this from their Scriptures, but they didn't understand how to interpret the prophet Isaiah's words which we heard in this morning's first reading. They could not imagine that God could call people from another race and religion and place to announce the birth of God's Messiah's through a star, of all things.

Contemporary scientists and astronomers are still learning how to interpret stars in the universe. The new Webb telescope has brought big epiphanies to astronomers. The new infrared pictures have shown that what they had thought were big stars are instead, other galaxies, further away from earth, which are filled with billions of other stars we never knew were there.

Both the wisemen and the Webb telescope remind us that God can reveal new insights, epiphanies, which surprise us and change our perspective on life. God and the universe are so much greater than any person can fully comprehend. None of us can fully recognize the ways in which God continues to be at work changing and unfolding the cosmos, this planet, all nations and religions, as well as our little lives.

What we do know is that human beings do not like change. We don't like to hear that we are not in control, so we tend to resist change. This is why Herod ordered the wisemen to return from Bethlehem and tell him where they found the baby who would be King of the Jews. He lied, saying he also wanted to worship this baby. In fact, Herod planned to kill this baby who threatened his power and control as King in Jerusalem. The religion scholars also resisted this baby born to be King of the Jews and King of the Universe. They verbally attacked him constantly, rejected the teachings and healings of Jesus throughout his life. And of course, they conspired with Pilate, the next Roman leader in Jerusalem, to have Jesus crucified. So we see that in the first century, both religious and political leaders, as well as many ordinary people ignored and rejected the Epiphany of change and hope God sent into the world in Jesus Christ.

In our generation, how do we respond to God's Epiphany messages? Let's wonder together: In what new directions might God be unfolding the next chapters of this 13 billion year old universe? What will the future of this fragile planet earth be like? In what ways might we still be refusing to see the light and hope Jesus came to give us?

Is God sending messages to us through global warming and the changes in weather patterns? I don't believe God caused Putin to invade Ukraine or caused Hamas to attack Israel or caused Israel to be so relentless in bombing and killing so many thousands of children and adults in Gaza and the West Bank. But could there be a potential Epiphany for the whole world in these terrible wars? Is God trying to tell the whole world to look and see, as they observe these tragic and devastating humanly instigated wars, that we need to stop killing each other; that fear, violence and greed only perpetuate a never ending cycle of fear, violence and greed; that human beings can only survive on this planet if we learn to respect, listen to, cooperate with and love each other, working for the good of all our human neighbors whom God created, as well as the good of this planet, through which God sustains our lives?

This Epiphany, perhaps God is seeking motivate some of us to praying and acting more deeply for justice and peace locally and globally. Perhaps to expressing our concerns with our neighbors, saying simply that Jesus taught us that we need to stop killing each other, stop pretending that it is ok to kill people, even people we feel are our enemies. Is God calling some of us to speak up and act to bring change to what is not right in our world, with gentle, loving, non-violent voices yet with strong clarity, even when we know others will criticize us?

Since we are doing some wondering about what changes, what fresh epiphany messages God might be sending to this world, let's go further and ask: what other epiphany messages might God have specifically for us about our life together here at Trinity?

We've been without a regular priest for almost a year and a half. We have been without a regular priest for at least 4 of the last ten years. There is a huge shortage of clergy across this country. Churches and synagogues are closing because of decreasing attendance. We and churches across the country have also had difficulty affording and finding organists and administrative assistants. We can worry about these trends and worry about the future of Christianity and the future of Trinity. We can and do grieve all the losses, all the changes that are going on.

But let's dare to ask a radical question: What if God has an Epiphany for us in all these changes in our church? What if God is saying, I'm trying to do something new on this planet. The way Christians have been being church is not working as I had hoped and planned. I taught you to love God and all your neighbors. Can't you see that Christians and religious people are consistently attacking each other about the problems of our country and world and church? Can't you see that your nation is spreading war around the world and here at home you are accepting the increases of violent gun deaths, opioid deaths and suicides, accepting increasing deaths by poverty and loneliness and lack of medical insurance as a new normal in this country? These things are the opposite of loving your neighbors, as I taught you to do. I expected that my church would lead the world in teaching and practicing my way of love.

So because of all these failures of practicing my command to love your neighbors as you love yourselves, as the key to sustaining the human race, I'm allowing the old, ineffective ways of being church to die and inviting you at Trinity, and every congregation, to follow me in changing the way church functions. I want you to stay true to the deep message I gave you: keep growing in love and worship with God and in loving relationships of service with all your neighbors. These things won't change. But the church community needs to go deeper and get simpler, so my Light can shine brighter in and through you. Don't invest so much time and money in maintaining things that are not essential to my mission. Focus on deepening and expanding your love with God and neighbor.

Although you may not recognize it, I'm in the process of changing the way I want you and all Christians, all people, to function together. Just keep seeking and listening for my guidance, follow the new epiphany lights I will keep giving you. Can you see that I've already been guiding you, even without a regular priest or organist, or administrative assistant? Yes, it has not been easy to learn how to be a lay led, God guided community. Not everyone likes this new reality. I'll invite you into even more changes in the future. But for right now, don't you see me in the people who worship here every week? Don't you see me at work through all your mission outreach projects? I'm bringing healing and hope to many people through you, just as you are. Don't you see me speaking through worship and Bible studies and Zoom groups in this parish? I'm here, shining in and through you. And I'm inviting you to keep trusting me to guide you, to help you discover new ways of being church and sharing my Good News of Love with a broken and hurting world. It won't be easy at times. But I'm here with you always. I will keep sending you epiphany guidance in the middle of the many uncomfortable struggles you will experience. So keep praying, keep talking with me and with each other, keep imagining and persistently exploring the new ways I'm calling you to live in this community, to be my lights in the darkness, to be hope in the despair, to be part of the New Creation I'm evolving in this world.

Let's close our eyes for a few moments. We've asked some very radical questions...and explored many different potential epiphanies that Christ might be showing us at this time in our lives as a nation, as a parish and as individuals. In the silence, let's each ask God to help us recognize what fresh epiphany insights have you experienced this morning?...

Since we humans always resist the changes which epiphanies require, what resistances do you notice in yourself, to some of the epiphanies you have thought about this morning?...

During coffee hour, I invite anyone who wants to ask questions, to dream, to talk more about today's sermon to join me for more conversation about Epiphanies.

Since the Epiphany Light of Christ has come to live within us from our Baptism, let us sing a closing prayer together, with our eyes closed. You all know it, so just follow me as we sing our prayer: "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.... "Jesus gave it to us, we're gonna let it shine...