

Epiphanies and Insights
Rev. Anne Treadwell
Sunday, January 4, 2009

READING: When the Song of Angels is Stilled (*Howard Thurman*)

When the song of angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

This is the work of the congregation, in this new year.

SERMON: Epiphanies and Insights

On January 6th, some observant Christians mark “*the Feast of the Epiphany*”. If you know what the phrase means, you’re probably either from that religious tradition or a literary buff, because the word “*epiphany*” crops up frequently in novels and poems and literary studies. It’s literally a “*showing*,” as in the legendary showing of Jesus to the Three Kings; the word *epiphany* comes from a Latin word which in turn was derived from Greek, from *epiphainein* to manifest. So it commemorates the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, or in the Eastern Church the baptism of Christ.

Wait a moment! What does the visit of the Magi to the stable in Bethlehem have to do with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist when he was a grown man? Well, in western Christian tradition Epiphany commemorates “*the first manifestation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles*.” Translation: those strange visitors, called magi or wise men or kings, were apparently the first non-Jews to recognize that the child born in Bethlehem was in fact the Saviour of the world. In the churches of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the recognition of Christ’s divinity occurs first at his baptism by John in the Jordan River. For these churches that was the

breakthrough moment, the occasion on which it was recognized that this man was in fact the Son of God, and **that's** the event which is observed as Epiphany, manifestation, **showing**.

The time after Christmas is often a letdown within a secular, consumer-focused culture. But in the "*kin-dom*," (a wonderful word introduced by a United Church minister as a substitute for "*kingdom*"), in the **kindom**, the circle of divine kinship, the story is different. Light expands into dark places. Newness appears in the midst of routine. Life bursts out of the expected deadness in the natural world. So for Christians, and perhaps even for Unitarians too, this time of the year can be an occasion for illumination and discovery, a **breakthrough moment** in which those things that are most real (and therefore most divine) in human life come shining through.

Epiphany, for us, can mean something closer to its original Greek sense of a manifestation of the divine, or its modern literary sense of "*an intuitive grasp of reality usually through something simple and striking, an illuminating discovery, a revealing scene.*" A typical use of the word is in this sentence by a writer called Frank Maier: "*I experienced an epiphany, a spiritual flash that would change the way I viewed myself.*" Someone else, who had an epiphany in a dream, wrote: "*Little did I realize when I lay down to sleep that I would awaken in the morning seeing and experiencing the world through new eyes.*"

I've been struck by how **visual** most of the references to epiphanies are. Perhaps it's partly because of the definition of the word, "*manifesting or showing*", or its origin with the Greeks who may have been more into **seeing** important things than **hearing** them, but for whatever reason the moments of insight and awareness which are experienced as epiphanies nearly always seem to involve **seeing**, rather than sensing in other ways. There's a "*spiritual flash*" and then the world is seen "*through new eyes.*" Perhaps human beings instinctively recognize the life-changing potential of what we **see** – consider how many people have a desire to see a certain place on the planet, a desire that has little or nothing to do with practical benefit. "*The Taj Mahal by moonlight.*" Or, for Italians, "*See Naples and die.*" Epiphanies are **visual**.

There's another Christian story about an event which is supposed to have occurred not long after the visit of the Magi – another "*showing*", this time when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem for the ritual Jewish presentation of their baby son and the offering of a prescribed "*pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.*" A very devout man called Simeon was

in the Temple (a man who was always thinking and talking about the coming of the Messiah), and he took the baby Jesus into his arms, saying,

*“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for **mine eyes have seen thy salvation** a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”*

That was an epiphany all right. The story doesn't say whether Simeon died shortly afterwards or lived on to a ripe old age, but he certainly was going to see the world in a different way from that moment on. Now it was, for him, a world in which the Messiah was no longer **expected** but **present**, and I have little doubt that he told everyone about it, probably **often**!

There are famous epiphanies in modern literature. Some writers are particularly renowned for their ability to convey these moments of flashing insight -- the poet Wordsworth, the novelist James Joyce, the short-story writer O. Henry, for instance. Here's a sonnet from Wordsworth that's particularly relevant because it not only gives us one of his own insights but laments that our capacity for epiphanies seems to be diminishing in the modern world – and two hundred years later we can only multiply his lament many times.

*The world is too much with us; late and soon
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

*This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;*

*It moves us not. – Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn,
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea,
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.*

I think Wordsworth would totally understand and approve the rise of Neo-paganism in our time!

It was the Irish novelist James Joyce who actually coined the term epiphany for these moments of sharp insight, making them the centre of his fiction. In an essay, Joyce describes seeing a very simple thing, a clock on an office tower in Dublin, seeing the clock in a different way than he's ever seen it before, in what becomes, in his words, "*the most delicate and evanescent of moments.*" Joyce says about the clock,

*I will pass it time after time, allude to it, refer to it, catch a glimpse of it. It is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin's street furniture. Imagine my glances at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. Then all at once **I see it** and I know at once what it is Its soul, its [being], leaps up ... from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object seems ... radiant.*

Perhaps this is the counterpoint of what some psychologists and some religious people call the oceanic experience, the dissolving of the ego, the sense of union with all that is. This is the experience of distinctness, integrity, individuality, and it is no less wonderful. It is a divine manifestation, **an epiphany**, a foundation for living life thereafter in a way more respectful of all the separate and distinct people and things which make up our world.

As a special example of these positive epiphanies, I suggest a short story by the American writer O. Henry; he gave us a tale in 1905 that's especially appropriate for today because it's called The Gift of the Magi. I commend it to you for reading in its entirety --it's not very long and it's sweetly charming without being too sentimental. Some of you will remember that it's about a young couple with very little money who want to give each other really special Christmas presents. She has long beautiful hair and he wants to give her some jewelled tortoiseshell hair ornaments she's admired; **he has to sell his treasured pocket watch** to be able to afford them. She wants to give him a platinum chain for that treasured watch; **she has to sell her hair** to be able to afford it. The story ends with their **insight** into each other's love, and the author comments:

The magi, as you know, were wise men--wonderfully wise men--who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word

*to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. **Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest.** Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.*

Once we know what epiphanies are, we might ask, “*How can I have them (and do I really want to)?*” Just in case you think that’s a purely rhetorical question, I suggest that you **really may not want to wish too hard for them**. Revelations, however true they are, can be very uncomfortable, even painful, even threatening to one’s sense of well-being. Think of Adam and Eve and the knowledge of good and evil; think of Pandora’s box; think of anyone, perhaps even yourself, who’s been able to exist quite happily without these flashes of insight into the reality of things. Remember what T.S. Eliot had one of the wise men say in his poem “*The Journey of the Magi*”:

*We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.*

And as an even more vivid illustration of the dangers of epiphany, here is part of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “*The Lady of Shalott*”, describing a young noblewoman who has been shut up in a secluded castle all her life until she catches a glimpse of **something else**:

*Four grey walls, and four grey towers overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers the Lady of Shalott.
There she weaves by night and day a magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say a curse is on her if she stay to look down to Camelot.*

*And moving through a mirror clear that hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear, winding down to Camelot.
And sometimes through the mirror blue the knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true, the Lady of Shalott.*

*But in her web she still delights to weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often through the silent nights a funeral, with plumes and lights and music, went to Camelot.
Or when the moon was overhead, came two young lovers lately wed;
"I am half sick of shadows," said the Lady of Shalott.*

*A bow-shot from her bower-eaves, **he** rode between the barley-sheaves,
The sun came dazzling through the leaves, and flamed upon the brazen greaves
Of bold Sir Lancelot.*

The gemmy bridle glittered free like to some branch of stars we see

Hung in the golden Galaxy. The bridle bells rang merrily as he rode down to Camelot.
From the bank and from the river he flashed into the crystal mirror,
"Tirra lirra," by the river sang Sir Lancelot.

*She left the web, she left the loom, she made three paces through the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom, she saw the helmet and the plume,
She looked down to Camelot.*

And it's all downhill from there, I'm afraid. The lady reaches out for glittering Camelot, but she dies, and all that an unaware Lancelot can say, as her body floats down the river below her castle-prison, is that *she has a lovely face*. Lovely but **too sheltered, cursed with being too sheltered** to cope with the colourful, demanding reality of life outside the tower.

The terrible thing about epiphanies, those "*aha moments*" as some have called them, is that they can't be undone. Once you've seen things as they really are, you can't put them back behind the cloud of unknowing again. Adam and Eve couldn't **un-eat** the apple. The dwellers in Plato's shadowy cave couldn't return to their previous way of understanding the world. The Lady could never be content within those grey walls after she'd seen glittering Lancelot. The Magi couldn't be at home in the old dispensation. **Be careful** before you wish for an insight or epiphany.

But some people think it's worth it. On the twelfth day after Christmas, we remember those mysterious strangers heading toward Bethlehem following a star. "*Hitch your wagon to a star,*" is the advice of Ralph Waldo Emerson. **Hitch your wagon to a star**, whatever the cost in comfort may be. If you resonate to that advice -- if you really yearn to know good and evil, if you want to see things as they are, and **yourself** as you are, if you long to emerge from the usual anaesthetized state of human life -- here are two small suggestions:

Wake up,

and

smell the coffee.

In other words, **pay attention**. That's really the only requirement. Although it's not guaranteed to enlighten you, all experience suggests that it's **necessary** if you want to be enlightened.

Don't be like Befana. She's the old woman in Italian tradition who was too busy to see the Three Wise Men as they went to Bethlehem. She said she'd see them on their return. According

to the biblical legend, as you may remember, they returned by another way. Befana was doomed to look for them forever.

Don't be too busy for an epiphany. But the **good news** is that you don't need to leave what you're doing. Wherever you are, whoever you are, whatever's happening in your life, is more than sufficient focus for your attention. Ponder these words from Richard Gilbert:

***Here is the center of the world.** While divines locate the pivotal point
In places far away and long ago, in prophets and seers and holy writ,
In sacred histories and solemn incantations,
The secret of all that is or ever shall be is floating in the fleeting now.
In this instant is centered the whirling orbs, the movement of earth and sky.
In this fragile fragment of time is the culmination of all that has been
And the promise of all that shall be.*

Here in our grasp, in this moment, is the center of the world.

To all of you, I offer this blessing (or toast, which is probably much the same thing) from Patrick O'Neill:

Here's to epiphanies great and small whenever they occur. A blessing on all Wise Men and Women, East and West. Here's to the stargazers and pilgrims everywhere, who are still foolish enough and brave enough to follow their stars, who travel by night, who bestow their uncommon gifts on us all.

And for this New Year 2009, my wish for you, in the words of naturalist Edward Abbey, is:

*May your trails be **crooked**, winding, **lonesome**, dangerous, **leading to the most amazing view**.*