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January 8, 2017
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Here we are at the beginning of another year. This week at our first staff meeting of the year it was revealed that three of us will be singing the infamous Beatles' song, "When I'm 64" during the course of the upcoming twelve months. We will NOT, however, reveal to you which three.... Unless you force us to.

Epiphany comes from a Greek word which means "to reveal or to manifest" and has entered both Latin and subsequently English primarily as a word describing how Jesus was revealed as divine to the Gentiles. Many high churches still celebrate January 6th as the Feast of the Epiphany, remembering the visit of the Magi as the moment at which Jesus was revealed to the Gentiles, to the non-Jewish "rest of the world". In the whole season of Epiphany, which lasts until Ash Wednesday when Lent begins, the theme is how Jesus becomes known to the wider world. Thus it is also the season in which we, as Christians, celebrate outreach and mission to the rest of the world. It is our time to reveal ourselves as Christians worthy of the name, ready to follow in Jesus' footsteps of justice and compassion.

Epiphany is also a word that is used outside of a specific Christian context. In English it means, "a manifestation of any divine or supernatural being" OR, it may more generally mean "a moment of sudden revelation or insight." According to my online search, its use in the English language has been increasing steadily in the last two hundred years. Many of us now use the word "epiphany" to describe some sudden understanding or symbolic connection that we may make. When I use the word, it also has a measure of mystery about it, as if that understanding happens beyond the purely rational level. If it is a specifically scientific or rational insight we may say "Eureka" or "Aha"

hearkening back to Archimedes and the bathtub. But to claim I have had an epiphany is to include an element of the divine or mysterious.

Writing in *Psychology Today* some six years ago, Elise Ballard says: “By epiphanies I mean the major, life-changing revelations that have had the greatest impact on our lives. It's been very interesting to notice that every single person I've talked to, whether the person has spiritual beliefs or not, speaks of these kinds of moments with a sense of reverence.”

She asked a large sample of people what their definition of epiphany was, and came up with a very wide variety of answers. One of her favorite answers - and mine, since it comes from one of my s-heroes, Maya Angelou's, is this answer:

"(Epiphany) probably has a million definitions. It's the occurrence when the mind, the body, the heart, and the soul focus together and see an old thing in a new way.“
Seeing an old thing in a new way. It is a miracle of wisdom, so to speak, a moment outside of time in which everything synthesizes together in a way that guides our living.

The gospel that we heard today is considered as the second epiphany, in the Christian sense, of Jesus' divinity: his baptism in the river Jordan by his cousin John. This is the moment in which God publicly claims his special relationship with Jesus, who up until this point has grown up in relative obscurity in Nazareth.

God claims, “This is my beloved child” openly in public. A dove descends from above to light on Jesus, the symbol of God's anointing as it had been in the Jewish tradition for quite some time before that. This person being baptized is to be God's public servant.

And what does it mean to be God's servant? For that understanding we turn to the passage we heard from Isaiah, one of several descriptions of the “suffering servant.”

“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.”

Every faithful Jew who happened to be standing by that river with John that day Jesus was baptized surely had that passage in mind. Here is the physical evidence of God’s spirit descending in the form of a dove; and with that anointing the faithful hear the promise of the ages: this is the one who will bring forth justice, not JUST to the Jews, but to all the nations. He has been given as a covenant to the peoples, a light; so that all those who are blind can see and all those who are imprisoned can be made free.

It is “The Epiphany” in the sense that the Jews’ expected messiah is made public to the whole world. And I imagine, for each one of the individuals gathered there, it was also a personal “epiphany” insofar as they came to understand that God’s divinity was actually there, present with them in the form of a human being, and this realization would change every one of their lives in ways they could not yet foresee.

As we modern day Christians consider what Epiphany was on that day, it’s clear that it was a public revelation – almost a press conference – of what role Jesus expected to play in the life of his people Israel. It’s also easy for us to understand the personal, individual impact this revelation has in terms of each one of the witnesses to the baptism.

What I’d like to help us think about today is how Epiphany also has an important impact upon the community as a whole. What do I mean?

First, Jesus went intentionally to seek out baptism – it didn’t come about casually. By doing so, he identified with all human beings and becomes fully human. Jesus is our brother, one of us, nothing less than that. All human beings have a deep longing for conversion: to be freed from the problems caused by our human shortcomings and sin:

our addictions, our problems with our children, our pursuit of the gods of materialism and fame. Jesus, by taking this spiritual longing upon himself, this desire for a new life free from all the sins that pursue us, understands what it really means to be human.

It is this solidarity of Jesus, this refusal to blame, that creates community amongst us. This is the Human One, our brother, the one who is always for us, who wants to free us from everything which imprisons us. He is one of us, and he really gets it.

And secondly, in this gospel, Jesus says he is baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness. Whatever does that mean? To fulfill (pleroo) means to fill up to the brim, to complete something. Righteousness (diakaiosyne) is right conduct before God, living in a way fully obedient to God's command. To fulfill all righteousness, then, is something more than affirming all the law and the prophets: it means to actualize them, to complete them, to bring alive the promises and the commands of God.

By going into the river, Jesus is saying "This is where we all belong, where we are honest about who we are. We put aside pretentiousness, grandiosity, superiority in these waters. We learn compassion, we learn to be in right relationship with one another, to suffer for and celebrate with others. We become part of the servanthood of God."

In this moment, Jesus has assumed his entire public identity. Madeline L'Engle says "after the baptism, there was no question in Jesus' mind as to who he was, and it was through this self-knowledge that he was enabled to see through the snares and delusions of the temptations. Most of us don't have that certainty, and so we become hungry and thirsty for the wrong things"

And so, as we enter this new calendar year, let us individually and corporately seek an epiphany – a renewal of baptism – in our own lives. As we are fed by the word and the

table of Christ, let us find and embrace God's purpose in the life of our community, our church, so that we, too, may be God's servants and God's light in the world. Amen.

Benediction:

Go now, and bear witness to the light so others might believe.

And may God fill the earth with peace;

May Christ give you grace from God's fullness;

And may the Holy Spirit lead you on straight paths.

Go in peace to love and serve God

Isaiah 42:1-9 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. 2He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. 5Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, 7to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 9See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17: Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”