

“Bringing the World to Life”

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Scripture: John 1: 1-18

Epiphanies are “Aha” moments in life when we seem to have a kind of light switch turned on in our minds. Cartoons used to represent a character’s having a brilliant idea or revelation by drawing a light bulb above the cartoon figure’s head. Epiphanies are times when we have a revelation of truth and insight that changes us...sometimes simply, sometimes profoundly.

I once had an epiphanal date with a young man whose social skills and sophistication far exceeded my own. I knew that we would be going to dinner at one of Jacksonville’s more upscale restaurants and I spent days deciding what to wear and brushing up on my knowledge of etiquette and social graces. Once seated at the table, though I did not drink, I maturely ordered white wine when asked my beverage preference by the tuxedoed waiter. My date...ordered iced tea. Following the third course in the meal, and having gotten through to that point with relatively little awkwardness, yet another in a series of delicacies was brought to the table. Thus far, my knowledge of which forks went with which foods had succeeded and my ability to appear confident even in the midst of being clueless had paid off. This fourth item, a platter of two of the most sumptuous looking pasta rolls ever was placed in the center of the table. They were carefully garnished with several lemon slices and steam rose elegantly above them. But I was at a loss as to the proper way to tackle them...which fork/spoon to use...and there was not a common serving utensil in sight. But I, feeling the victory of the evening, decided to proffer my most delightful 23 years of Southern charm and own up to my ignorance. “It looks wonderful,” I gushed. “But I haven’t a clue how to eat this.” Then I smiled. He sat back in his chair. Thank the good Lord for the twinkle in his eye, as he kindly remarked, “Well, you use your hands to squeeze the lemon over the top like this and then lift ‘the napkins’ to wipe your hands like this.” Seeing my pending humiliation, he carefully added, “It must be the wine with which I suspect you are also not familiar.”

Obviously that evening was one of those “light switch” times for me as I learned a very important lesson about life: you are better off embodying an authenticity that fits than a pretend sophistication that does not fit. Epiphanies have a way of grabbing us by surprise, capturing our attention, often changing us, so that we come away from the event with new perspective and frequently with altered beliefs...maybe even lives.

As we approach Epiphany on January 6 (Wednesday) which remembers the magi following the star to the manger in Bethlehem, we know that all those who allowed

themselves to be guided by that new bright star in the heavens, were on their way to an epiphanal experience. They would see Jesus and recognize the Son of God. Yet the Christian Epiphany is not really a story about Jesus. Like any truly valuable and meaningful epiphany, it is a story about us, about what happens to us, how we are changed, in this case, by an encounter with the Son of God. The most extraordinary epiphany you and I may have is right before us: the Word becoming flesh; God in Jesus Christ.

In this portion of the gospel of John, our lectionary for today, perhaps there are several aspects of the Epiphany to be had.. This first chapter of John's gospel is so poetic, so filled with image and metaphor and allusion that we could miss significant insights that John offers about a couple of them as we get lulled into a comfortable security by the text's cadence and rhythm. The Message, an alternative interpretation of this reading, breaks through in a way that we may hear the essentials of the "Word become flesh" epiphany boldly:

"The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one. Everything was created through him; nothing...not one thing!...came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out. The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

John pointed him out and called, 'This is the One! The One I told you was coming after me but in fact was ahead of me. He has always been ahead of me, has always had the first word.'" Perhaps we can say, "Aha! So Jesus had the first word as well as the last and we are wrapped in a divine plan of creation in the beginning and salvation in the end.

God and the Word have clearly functioned as a team, and John is reminding us and the various readers to whom he is writing—Jews and Gentiles alike—that these two have been around since before the beginning. Time and humanity are sort of bracketed by God...housed in this rather incredible life drama that occurs not just for us but for all people. And so the first aspect of this Word become flesh epiphany presents itself: God is Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, and everything in between. And you and I, we, are all in this together. We must move beyond small perspectives that only concern us to much vaster ones that include everyone, everywhere. That is what it means to have the light shine from above over all the earth...for all to see.

Jesus did not become flesh in order to come down here to rescue us as though there were some foreign, unlovable agent holding us captive. Jesus became flesh in order to draw all things back together to himself, to reconcile all things together...including the foreign, unlovable agent. And that is one aspect of the light, the perspective we are invited to share.

And there is more. In the initial dramatic housing found in Old Testament history, God had remained a bit of an abstract concept for most...and Israel had longed for a kind of tangible, concreteness with which they could interact and perhaps even emulate. “And (so) the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” And, seemingly suddenly, God was no longer abstract and “out there”. God was “with us”, present, here and now in the person of Jesus, dwelling among us. The verb used here to describe such dwelling recalls the Old Testament when the Hebrew practice was to seek God’s presence in a tent, the local tabernacle. There the people worshiped, prayed and made sacrifices. So deliberately chosen by John, one commentary suggests that these words could allow an interpretation to read, “...the Word became flesh and tabernacle or even pitched a tent...” among us. So when Jesus as Word and Son of God is born in the flesh, humanity is given the opportunity to know God in a different way. A quite tangible, “in the flesh” way. Those characteristics of God, those names for God that they had used for their praise and obedience (awesome, powerful, trustworthy, mighty, righteous, etc.) became vivid and visible...and, more importantly, *revealed*. The ancient names the people had assigned and attributed to God, now in this Word become flesh God, revealed in the flesh of Jesus. The God of Truth and Love is met as Truth, met as Love.

People were given an invitation to participate with and respond to God in a new way, one which had never been offered before. Such an experience of God, the Word become flesh, was life changing...and still is if we allow it to be. This in breaking of God into our world insists that we do more than go to worship, offer sacrifice/take up the offering and pray if such activities are otherwise devoid of personal relationship with God. The encounter with God has become one in the flesh, face to face, and the consequence of such intimacy is epiphanal...and demanding. We are changed as we see things/ see God in a different light. Such light redirects who we are.

“There is a crack, a crack in everything. That is how the light gets in,” writes Leonard Cohen, now 75 year old poet and songwriter. When light breaks in, we see clearly—often for the first time.

John takes us back, in his gospel, to the time when there were no cracks. John invites us back to “in the beginning” when there was only darkness, void, confusion, chaos. There was nothing, really, except the darkness and the Word and

God. Prior to the act of Creation, they crack open the darkness and light breaks through, God breaks into the world and the epiphany of sight is amazing. And now once again, as the Word becomes flesh, God breaks into our world in the person of Jesus, and, once again, the Light is revealing and epiphanal. But this time, you and I are implicated. We are asked to respond. We are created anew in this light and “to all of us who have received him he has given the power to become children of God,” says vs. 12. You and I are claimed and challenged by these words as brothers and sister of Jesus Christ, siblings, members of God’s family. We have been given power to become the children of God. What are we, all of us, to do with such power?

A second aspect of the Word become flesh epiphany, then, has to do with our part in the unfolding...in the star following...with our use of the power given us.

This Word made flesh has adopted us into the family business. You and I, like it or not, are in the word-made-flesh business. Not the Word made flesh business like Jesus with a capital W, but with a small “w”. And this is where our power lies. When the Word became flesh, God and all that God embodies were no longer abstracts. Words like grace and truth and love and mercy do not, cannot, come alive for us unless and until we have an experience of them. Jesus embodied these words and we, his disciples, sibling children of God, must now continue to flesh them out. Barbara Brown Taylor believes that almost everyone has a word that he or she has a gift for bringing to life. A word, maybe two, that consistently emerges out of his or her life, actions, or conversation. What word do you embody...what word do you make real and alive for those around you? What word are you flesh for?

One of my favorite activities on retreats...and I think I actually had us do this on one of our Session’s retreats awhile back...is to pick out three words that Christ brought to life through his ministry and death on the Cross. These words reflect the character of Jesus. For example, let’s say Jesus was vulnerable, available and responsible. Each person on the retreat is given one of these words and must exemplify that word (and wear it, actually, on a name tag for all to see) for a period of time until it is time to try on one of the other two words. It’s very telling to discover what it is like to be charged with the task of becoming that particular word in the flesh...even for a designated period of time. Jesus of course is THE WORD with a capital “W” and so embodies all of them. But you and I are the words of Christ as we speak them through our living. What word do you put flesh on daily that reflects your life having been changed by an encounter with Christ? What would others say is “your word”? Are you known for compassion, trustworthiness, generosity? Ask yourself. Ask others. But find out...and live it

passionately as Jesus did.

The Epiphany of the Word become flesh and dwelling among us is for everyone...an epiphany give to pull al things together, and we are invited to participate in the business of living out the words of God.

Post Word become flesh epiphany we are simply left with a decision...a decision about whether or not to follow the Light as John describes it or not. John Chrysostom calls it a “moral decision” because we are being asked to make a choice about how we will live our lives in relation to others. Will we be reconcilers and will we be ones who embody the words of Christ in our living? We decide whether or not we will be a part of these two aspects of the Word become flesh epiphany...whether we will join the epiphany, the family business. What will we choose?

Ironically, as the light broke through in the revelation of Creation in the beginning, as Light broke through into a darkness that was void and unstructured, the story of the Word made flesh dwelling among us comes to some closure in the darkness of a tomb. And once again God breaks through into that darkness, the rock securing the tomb is rolled aside and, once again, Light breaks through the darkness and what was in the beginning is once again: Light, life...now eternal life...and all are invited. Amen.