

When God has an Epiphany

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Feast of the Epiphany
Ballenger

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Happy New Year! How many of you have made some New Year's resolutions? My Facebook feed is filled with advice on how to make them, how to keep them, how to break them. It comes with the territory this time of year in the wider culture.

But the Church Calendar doesn't cooperate well with the new one that I just put on my door. New Year's in the Episcopal faith tradition, and many others, started in Advent. And that season was less about ringing in something new with champaign and party horns, than it was about quiet anticipation and preparation, with meditative songs and candle light. In our faith tradition, St. Nicholas visits December 6, not on the 25th, which we reserve for Jesus's arrival. Christmas season *starts* with the nativity, it doesn't end with it. Which means we get to keep our trees up at least through this weekend. I just learned that in the Middle Ages people kept their Christmas greenery up until Feb. 2, the feast of the presentation of Jesus in the temple, called Candlemas. So if you want to hold on to that tree a little longer, tradition says go ahead. They also believed that a goblin would appear for every bit of greenery that didn't get cleaned up after that day, so beware.¹

But I think one of the most important things that happens when our New Year of faith hits January is that we don't make resolutions. We have epiphanies.

It's worth thinking about the difference between those two things. New Year's resolutions often flow out of a sense of dissatisfaction with all the imperfections that we find in our lives, and we make earnest plans to fix ourselves by losing weight, or dropping a vice or taking up yoga or meditation.

¹ <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/christmas/leaving-up-christmas-decorations/?fbclid=IwAR34EdRGUOsTvIOg632GWQYRNHYU0zkKsGSsrbvcSt995dzIm3GzQfzf4s8>

But epiphanies, the kind that we celebrate today, are not things that we do at all. They are things that God does. They are manifestations of the presence of God – incontrovertible signs that God is with us and wants our attention and action. The Bible is filled with them: the burning bush, clouds of smoke and fire by night, angel visits, the birth of Jesus and the star that points out where to find him. They are taller than miracles, because they don't show us what God can do but where God is. Right here, in the midst, believe it or not.

And this is another place where the common language around the word differs from our language as church. If I say, I've had an epiphany, I typically am saying I've made a discovery, I've a Eureka moment or I have grasped an idea that had been evading me. But when God has an epiphany, God just shows up in ways that we notice. It is not an invitation to take control of our lives, but to surrender them to a God who is making all things new.

The other thing about God's epiphanies is that they are not private and personal affairs. They change the world.

Another Epiphany that we could have been celebrating today was in the Baptism of Jesus by John, when the skies open up, a dove descends upon Jesus and the divine voice says: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." God is made manifest in Jesus as he prepares to begin his own journey of public ministry, and those who have their ears to hear, listen.

But instead of celebrating the Baptism of the Lord today, we decided to linger on the story of the magi, whose official feast of the Epiphany was Friday, Dec. 6. Because I thought it would be worthwhile to linger with those foreign visitors a bit, and to make space for our statues of the three kings, which made it to the manger sometime this week.

In our story of the magi today, God shows up in a way that the world will take notice. This is not a sign just for Israel, who has had plenty of experience with a God that makes the divine self manifest. This is a sign for all those people outside of Israel who are looking for God through a different lens. They look to the skies, so God guides their vision with a star to follow. They look for a new ruler in the

region, so God sends them to a house in Bethlehem and looks back at them through the eyes of a peasant child. They look to their dreams, and God appears there with alternate directions home. The magi look for the revelation of something new in the world, and God shows them the divine self made manifest. They drop off their gifts and they leave with Good News to share – that's how God spreads the Word, who was made flesh in the birth of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul had a deep sense of the way that Jesus manifested the presence of God, opening the divine arms wide to all people, not just his own people. In today's letter to the Ephesians, we see how much Paul identifies his purpose with bringing the Gospel of Jesus to the gentiles. Recall that Paul had his own epiphany when Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus Road, healing his animosity toward those of his own people who were following Jesus. For Paul the epiphany of the Christ, the manifestation of Jesus as savior of all, heals the gravest of universal divisions – for early Christianity that was the division between gentile and Jew. So for Paul and early believers, the grace that comes from belief in Jesus the Christ is for " *all* equally and without reference to national, racial, or social identity."² Paul embraces the great truth that has been made manifest to him, and he acts a bit like that star in the Gospel of Matthew, guiding gentiles to Christ who gives everyone access to God, by nature of their faith.

We call this church season which begins this week, the Season after the Epiphany. It stretches from now until Lent. In it we'll find stories from the Gospel of Matthew this year – we'll learn of Jesus' ministry, the calling of his disciples, beatitudes and behaviors. And spoiler alert – the season will end with an epiphany – the transfiguration of Jesus on high mountain before he heads on his way to Jerusalem and the cross.

I think we should consider this time to be The Season of Epiphanies , where we might look at our lives with the expectation that God is making the divine self manifest there. So our question in this season might be “where is God appearing

² J. D. G. Dunn, *Oxford Bible Commentary, Ephesians*
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780198755005.001.0001/acref-9780198755005-chapter-72?rskey=JodFua&result=1>

to me, and beckoning me to follow?” Where do we typically look for a Word or sign from God, and how might we attune ourselves even more closely, more faithfully to what God might be revealing to us right there? How is God guiding us, and where is God taking us? These are not just personal questions of private faith, but they are questions of church, who we all are as the Body of Christ born into the world.

The magi of Matthew and the gentiles of Paul remind us that a key sign of the power of epiphany, of God made manifest, is the power to reconcile. So we might also ask ourselves individually and as church, how are we called to reveal the unifying, reconciling, forgiving and healing love of Christ more deeply in the relationships that we are in? How might God have epiphanies through us, for others, at a time when people are hungry for signs of love and healing?

And if, at the end of this season, you still feel the need to give something up, to make resolutions to change and renew, you can be comforted in knowing that the Church season of Lent is just around the corner.

But until then – Happy Epiphanies!

Amen!