

Epiphany

Year C, 2013

Happy Epiphany!

The dictionary defines “epiphany” as “a sudden realization about the nature or meaning of something.” I might say, “I’ve had an epiphany about our relationship” or “...about my work or vocation” or whatever. Specifically in the context of the church, Epiphany is the special feast day in which we remember how God made known the divine plan in a surprising way through an unexpected group of people. A strange star in the sky somehow revealed to non-Jewish wise men that there was to be a birth of a unique king of the Jewish people, members of a minor kingdom located on a narrow strip of land between Egypt and Syria. We celebrate this story as we sing the popular carol, “We Three Kings” and as we see the visitors finally arrive at the crèche (of course, no liturgically sound church will ever have them there before January 6th).

But what does this ancient story mean for us today? Is it just some sweet, seasonal sentiment that we remember from year to year? Or is there something more powerful, more relevant; something that we can hear, ponder, and respond to so that it can change our lives today? I believe it’s the latter. Because this story offers the promise that God reveals God’s plan to all of us. We learn God’s revelation does not always come through expected sources. We discover that God’s message sometimes surprises us, especially to those of us who consider ourselves as “insiders” in God’s plan. And through this annual feast of the church, we find out that God wants us to be open to divine revelation, even if it comes to us in surprising ways.

Let’s look back at the original Epiphany story to find those clues about how God revealed God’s plan. First, we’re told that strangers show up in town and shake things up. They report what they have learned from God and they ask a question that no one expects, especially from “these people,” people considered outsiders. They ask, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” We’re told the existing king is afraid of their question, which you might expect. Not many people in authority like to have rivals. But it’s not just the king who is afraid. We’re told all the people of Jerusalem are afraid, too.

Now why would that be? First it is because strangers, foreigners, bring a question and a message to an already established people. Their disruptive, divine message did not come through the approved channels. The religious experts and divinely-appointed leaders are consulted only after the fact as Herod asks them where this new king would be born. But the initiative, the energy for this unsettling question, this unexpected message, comes from

outsiders. The people who consider themselves “insiders” are surprised and, we learn, even afraid that God might speak to and through someone outside their group.

Second, the people are afraid of the question itself and the implied message, “There is a change coming—there is to be a new and different king.” These foreigners bring a question, a message that disrupts the status quo. Now if you read history, you know that King Herod was a cruel yet effective leader. He accomplished much during his reign, even rebuilding parts of the Temple that remain today as the Wailing Wall. But Herod was also known to use violence to maintain his power. The people were afraid of what could happen to them if a rival came on the scene—riots and civil war at worst; uncertainty at best. So the people were afraid. Yet despite their uncertainty and fear, God spoke to them through a question, “Where is this new leader?”

So we learn from this story that God’s word often brings a question; and that God’s message tends to upset the status quo, no matter how much God’s people might prefer the comfort of what they already know. We also learn that God’s message often comes from people we may consider strangers, people outside our group. Now for us today, we need to ask, “Is this Epiphany story just a onetime example of how God revealed God’s unfolding plan for the world? Or is this a pattern that God repeats, a way that God makes known God’s plan even today?” What do you think?

If this is the way God revealed God’s plan back then in the original Epiphany story, I believe that’s how God continues to reveal what God is about today. You see, God likes questions—that is still how God communicates to us, to inspire us and challenge us. And for God, there are no strangers—God communicates to and through all kinds of people, no matter our identity. And God likes to unsettle what folks rely on in order to bring new life and deeper truth. So if all that is the case about how God communicates; then we need to ask, “Who are the strangers for us today, the people outside our group? Who are the people who ask us troubling questions that surprise us, even upset us? And what are those questions for us? What is the epiphany for us today coming through an unexpected people? What do you think?

Well let’s start by considering our list of “strangers;” the people who are like the magi in the first story, coming to visit us today; people that might upset our world. The list would include anyone not like us. Now we’re a fairly homogenous group as Episcopalians, especially in this parish, Church of the Holy Spirit in Cumming GA. We’re primarily white, fairly well educated, more often affluent, older than average, and so forth. Does that seem an accurate description? Not for all of us, of course, but a good overview of us as a community.

If that is so, then the strangers for us are anyone different from that list of our characteristics. For example, we might consider immigrants as strangers—people who are new to the country, maybe people who speak a different language. They fit well with the story of

the magi. Or we might consider prisoners as strangers, people in the criminal justice system who have lost their freedom, whether justly or unjustly. We might consider a person who is poor as a stranger, someone barely getting by with enough to eat. All of these “strangers” would likely bring a question to us, a message from God for us to hear; something that might upset the status quo of our lives like the wise men disrupted the status quo of Herod and Jerusalem on the first Epiphany.

The list of strangers to us could go on; and it is a list worth us pondering. Let’s consider just one more group of “strangers” that are closer to home-- young people. First, we need to define “young people.” One way to define them is anyone younger than me, but that includes too many folks who are really pretty old (sorry). For the purpose of our reflection, let’s think of young people as teenagers and twenty-something’s. This group, not unlike Gentile wise men two thousand years ago, is thought of by many church insiders as people who can’t teach us anything, especially about God and for the mission of the church. Their dress, their behaviors, their music, their language are so different. People over thirty (and definitely those of us over fifty) often ask, “Why can’t they just be ‘normal’—in other words, why can’t they be like us?”

Well the truth is that many young people don’t want to be like the rest of us. They may question our values of career, marriage, money, and the way we define success. Instead they want to find a new and different way. And for us, not unlike Herod and the people of Jerusalem two thousand years ago, their message, their questions, can be threatening. Their differences with us aren’t just a matter of externals, like dress or music. They really see the world differently—they follow a different star, so to speak.

Yet their questions can bring a message we need to hear. It isn’t simply that they are right and we’re wrong. It’s that we need to hear them and be open to what God is saying to them and through them to us. So if young people follow a path where they seek a simpler life that questions the need for more status and conformity to social expectations, then that sounds intriguingly like the path taken by that unique king the wise men sought. But let’s be honest—for many of us, that message and those questions may threaten and disrupt our world.

So what can we do with these particular “strangers” among us, teens and twenty-something’s that are following a different star from us? Well unlike Herod and all of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, hopefully we can respond without fear or feeling the need to control these “strangers.” Instead of being threatened by their differences from us, we can actually listen to their questions, and be open to God’s message to us through them. If we do, we may even learn from them and question and change how we live. Maybe we will be less concerned with what society thinks and be more willing to follow a different path.

And if we start by listening to young people, then we as the church might create a more welcoming space for all people regardless of our ages, or any other characteristics that make us strangers to each other. To do that fully, our church will need to change and that will make many of us uncomfortable. But it will also create the opportunity for us to live together in a deeper, more meaningful way; to worship together with more creativity and passion; and then be faithful to include and serve a broader range of people in Jesus' name. If we're open to God and if we listen to people who are different from us and if we then make changes in how we live-- what an exciting epiphany that will be for all of us. Amen.