

Sermon 010316 Epiphany
Scripture John 2: 1-11
Sermon Title- Epiphaminies

I have a confession to make. I normally avoid looking back at sermons I gave in the past when preparing for sermons. I try to take a fresh approach to scripture and the issues it speaks to. But when it comes to certain church holidays like Epiphany, I find there is only so much to be said. I tend to look back at previous sermons that I have given and borrow from them. Today, I'm using a whole sermon that I have given before with some minor tweaking. I have not given this sermon before here, but in two other churches.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. In various Christian traditions, three different events are viewed as the Epiphany: the story of the Magi, the wedding in Cana (the first miracle performed by Jesus in biblical accounts), and the Baptism of Jesus. These three events are viewed as the realizations that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. In our tradition, we look at the visit from the Magi as the Epiphany. The truth is that there were events all through the Jesus story in which he was revealed as the Son of God. All the teachings, all the healings, the Transfiguration, all the miracles, the passion story, right up to and certainly including the Resurrection were a series of realizations that the Spirit of God was upon Jesus.

Let's talk about about the definition of the word epiphany; that is small 'e' epiphany. My favorite definition of an epiphany is a big AHAH moment...some big realization that comes to you all of a sudden. There is a story in the Bible about an epiphany that changed the world. In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 9, a terrible persecutor of Christians named Saul was on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. As it says in verse three and following, "As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed all around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'" That was a huge epiphany for Saul as you might expect. Saul changed his name to Paul and he also changed his life. More accurately, Jesus changed his life. We know him as St. Paul, the greatest evangelist in the history of Christianity, who wrote much of the New Testament. His life was turned around in that moment of epiphany.

I believe that the Road to Damascus story is similar to the 'born again' experiences of many Christians. The stories have a similar ring to them. Someone living a so-called wicked life accepts Jesus as their personal savior and goes on to a life of Christian devotion. Now, I don't question the reality of those experiences. From Paul on through all the people who had

moments that their lives turned around by Jesus, are wonderful and enviable. I just can't relate to them. I've never had an epiphany... getting knocked on my butt by a vision of God, or a 'born again' experience, or the big AHAH moment where my life was turned completely around.

Instead, I have had in my life a series of small moments of illumination instead of one big one. I call these small moments of illumination, epiphaminies. Yes, epiphaminies...mini-epiphanies. Epiphaminies. Now, go with me on this. In the immortal words of Professor Aldus Dumbledore in Harry Potter, "It is not your abilities that makes you who you are, Harry, it is your choices." It is not our abilities that make us who we are, it is our choices. I have had many, many moments in my life, daily in fact, where I've had to choose the right or the wrong, the good or the bad and it is epiphaminies, small moments of illumination that help me see the way. For the devoted Christian, life is a series of encounters with temptations. Life is about choices, and epiphaminies are a way for this Christian to make those choices.

I'll give you a few examples. When I was in my twenties, I was unchurched and a commercial fisherman in Martha's Vineyard. I told this story once in a summer sermon in the vestry. There were three of us in an open boat long lining for codfish. It was February and very, very, cold. A big windstorm had kicked

up. We were on our way out into open water in order to pick up our catch. We had a following sea on the way out and no problem hauling in our substantial catch. When we had all the gear and fish on board, we headed back to harbor, but now *into* the wind. I was piloting and was immediately hit in face by a wave that splashed over the bow of the boat. It was so cold, the salt water started freezing onto the boat. Then another wave and more ice. We were staring to sink or potentially capsize. We were in trouble. My mates, one with a crowbar and one with a hammer, started smashing ice while I piloted the boat back to harbor. I didn't think we were going to make it back. We did, obviously, but with only maybe an inch of freeboard. A witness said we looked like an iceberg with a motor. Another degree colder or a little farther out and that would have been it. For me, it was a serious brush with death. Once I was warm and dry, I had a moment of illumination. I was so thankful for my life, so appreciative of being here in this world. That gratefulness, born from a near death experience, has never left me. That was an epiphany. It didn't turn my life around, but it changed the way I see the world in a small but important way.

Another story is a broken marriage story. I spent a lot of time angry and resentful when my first wife left and divorced me. With the help of a counselor, I came to the realization that if I was

to move on, I needed to forgive her and ask her forgiveness. I did that in a letter to her. She never responded to the letter. But the fact that I wrote and sent that letter helped me heal and move on. That epiphany helped me choose forgiveness over resentment.

The epiphanies really gained steam when I started coming to church. Jesus helps me all the time now with epiphanies. Jesus, his teachings, and his stories light my way daily. My epiphanies have come regularly here at Union Church. When I see, for example, the relatively small group of lay people that are giving of themselves so much and so often to hold this church together and move it forward, it inspires me in my choices and my efforts as your pastor. I won't kid myself, or you, that all my life choices are good ones or the right ones. I'm trying to be the person Jesus wants me to be but I still make wrong choices.

I think of it like piloting a boat on the ocean. When you set your course, say to the harbor, as you move forward, you are always being pushed off course by wind and moving tides. If you are the pilot, you are constantly being moved off course and then you correct your course. So piloting a boat is a constant process of falling off your course and correcting your course. It's like that in life. We move forward but the world and our choices can move us off course. But the good news is that we get another chance. We get another chance. If we get off course we can make choices that

bring us back on course. And for me, epiphaminies help me to make the choices that will bring me back on that true course.

There is a wonderful poem by the great poet Robert Frost that captures for me this notion of making choices. It is called:

The Road Not Taken

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And being one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, just as fair,
And perhaps having the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden back.
Oh! I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads onto way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Yes, my friends, it is true that it is not our abilities that make us who we are; it is our choices. And for this traveler, it is not one big epiphany that made the difference, but epiphanies, small moments of illumination that have made *all the difference*. AMEN