

Sunday January 3, 2021 - Epiphany Sunday

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14; Matthew 2: 1-12

Epiphany Light

Rev. Shannan R. Vance-Ocampo, General Presbyter

Those of you who know me well know that Epiphany is my favorite holiday in the liturgical year. It's an often-overlooked holiday in the Protestant tradition. When I would plan out worship months in advance, when serving congregations, it used to annoy me that nearly every year the lectionary would skip over Epiphany, going straight from the first Sunday after Christmas to Baptism of the Lord.

So I'd change the lectionary, and push the baptism back a Sunday.

January 6 is officially Epiphany Day, and usually it falls in the middle of a week, not on a Sunday, and so rarely gets celebrated. I remember no mention of this day in church when I was growing up. It wasn't talked about at home either. And it wasn't covered in my liturgy and worship class at a Presbyterian seminary. Not until I got married and began to learn about my husband's traditions from Colombia did I begin to think about Epiphany.

Some have heard this story before, so I will give you the Cliff Notes Version. In Colombia, the tradition is to put up an elaborate Nativity Scene in your home. Only in recent generations have Christmas Trees entered into homes there. On the nine nights before Christmas prayers are said together as a family around the Nativity Scene and small gifts are offered each night (think small like stocking stuffers) to children. Songs are sung and then meals and desserts and more music happens. These are festive nights, and we usually host dinner parties even here in our home in the United States each night, sharing this tradition with friends here. This year, our Novenas are relegated to zoom only. Then, on the days between Christmas and Epiphany the figurines of the Magi and their camels begin to move around the Nativity Scene, drawing closer and closer to the Baby Jesus, until they are there on Epiphany Day. And more singing, gifts and celebrations.

I have fallen in love with this tradition. It has made Christmas real to me each year. It is a way to teach children the Christmas story from the Gospels, as each night, the story is told from different character's points of view, one night the Angel Gabriel, another night the shepherds, another night Mary, still another night Joseph and so on. As my daughter, Sofia has grown up, she has grown in her role in these celebrations. When she was a little girl, she loved moving the figurines and helping gather local moss from our garden and twigs from our yard to adorn it (it also incorporates living plants and running water). As she grew up and began to learn how to read, she began to recite portions of the story and lead some of the singing. Little gifts hidden in the Nativity Scene encourage children to pay attention and to not be afraid to play with or touch these representations of the Gospels. After Christmas Day, the traveling of the camels and the Magi each year are filled with fun. Some years they travel as a huddled group, other years alone, some years, just the Magi and still other years the camels leave the

Magi behind. It's both play and holy, divine and earthy. The Nativity Scene is misted with water so that the moss and the plants from outside that come inside to make up the living landscape continue with their natural fragrances. You can quite literally, smell, see, touch and hear your way through the story.

In our Protestant traditions, we have let go, years ago, of many of the "smells and bells" of worship. The divisions of the Reformation loom large even today. But I have come to learn that these embodied ways of engaging scripture are so important. It wasn't a lesson I learned growing up, or was taught much about in my theological formation. It was a lesson I learned through my marriage, and through the experience of integrating new traditions into my life. These things have deepened and matured my faith, and have woven themselves into my own story of faith. The Nativity Scene and Prayers, *Pesebre y Novena*, tradition from Colombia has been an epiphany of sorts for me and for my faith. I am not sure I really understood all the richness this season has to offer us as a journey of discipleship until something new came into my life.

What new learning, what epiphany are you needing on this day, the first Sunday of a New Year?

What Word from God are you longing to hear, what star are you desperate to have burst into your life?

What visitors do you wish you could be with, what Resurrection promise do you wish for this world?

These are all Epiphany questions. The Magi visit the Christ Child and his parents. The scene is one of the holy clash of poverty and unabashed opulence as bursts onto the scene carried on the backs of camels and presented from the hands of wise and holy people who are capable and gifted of seeing the mystical and spiritual at work where others cannot. There is an angry, selfish, insecure and violently dangerous King in Herod who wants to kill what God is doing in this world - and as one commentator notes, "[i]t is a historical reality that when the powerful are hell-bent on a particular goal, there is going to be 'collateral damage,' and such damage can almost always be measured in human and ecological cost."¹ And there is a Star, a sign that the New Life and salvation the Christ Child brings is not just for humans, but is indeed, as the Savior will later say in his own ministry, for all of Creation.

It is, in fact, as universal and all-encompassing of a love as you can find. The Story of Epiphany, the in-beaking of God's fragrant and out-of-this-world salvation in the midst of the Herod's of this world is as true and as needed today as it was over 2000 years ago.

My friends, here we are, at the beginning of a New Year. A lot of talk was that 2020 was a bad year. In many ways, it was. Maybe not bad, but terrible and terrifying might be more like it. Maybe 2020 was the year you woke up to something, maybe 2020 was the

¹ Pugh, Mary, commentary on Matthew 2: 1-12 in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year B, Volume 1*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2020. pages 167.

year you realized how much you need to deepen your own discipleship and faithfulness. That's the journey of 2020 that I saw this Presbytery go on collectively and I am praying that this journey continues into 2021. I witnessed a journey of ministry from all of you, faithfulness from each of you, fortitude and strength, tenderheartedness and care, justice and truth-telling. It was a year filled with epiphanies, and every day in this new year can be filled with them too.

I invite you on this Sunday or later this week on Wednesday which is Epiphany Day to light a candle.

If you have a Nativity Scene, don't take it down.

Take some time with it each day.

Pick up the figurines.

Imagine the Story from each of their perspectives.

And let's the Holy Spirit fill you up and even bring you to your knees like the Magi.

Look back at the last year and give thanks for the gifts it offered and pray for the hurts it inflicted.

Go beyond yourself and spend time in prayer thinking about our global, earthly and heavenly community.

Pray for the coming year and for what epiphanies it might open up for you, for your community, your family, our country, Creation.

Pray for healing, and pray for courage.

Pray as the Prophet does in the reading for today:

Arise, shine; for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...

Lift up your eyes and look around!

Steams of camel caravans from as far as the eye can see...²

...loaded with gold and frankincense.

Preaching the praising of God with their steps as they seek out the Christ Child.

Amen.

² My own interpretation of Isaiah 60, inspired by *The Message* by Eugene Peterson.