

Paul's Epiphany

Ephesians 1:3-14
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An epiphany is a revelation. It's a moment of "Aha, I see." It's an experience of clarity. In religious terms, an epiphany is a realization that God is still speaking, has just spoken, or is about to speak.

When Matthew records the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; it is immediately apparent that these majestic travelers from afar are not Hebrew people. They don't know anything about Isaiah or the other Hebrew prophets who had spoken of a Messiah. They aren't acquainted with Hebrew protocol. They are foreigners who speak a different language and eat different food and have a different world view. Yet, they see the star, and they come.

So, the Biblical Epiphany, the "aha" is that people all over the world are responding to God's coming, to God's offering a Light to the Gentiles as well as to the descendants of Moses. Royalty from far off lands come to honor the Christ child, even to worship him. This is a new thing! God is speaking in a new way! Matthew wants the church to see clearly that its doors must be open to everyone who is curious about the Messiah, to everyone who seeks the Light, to everyone who yearns to be loved without condition.

It had been assumed that the Messiah would come to liberate the Hebrew people from those who oppressed them. The Epiphany, however, is that the Messiah comes to liberate all of humanity from whatever is oppressive, whatever is enslaving, whatever is

bullying, whatever tends to rob us of the abundance of life God intends.

Though we are all familiar with the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; most of the New Testament is composed of letters written by the Apostle Paul to the many churches scattered throughout the Mediterranean: churches at Philippi and Ephesus and Corinth and Galatia and Thessalonica, and Rome. Paul had a hand in establishing these many congregations on his three missionary journeys. In these letters, Paul sets out his understanding of the Epiphany, of the new vision God is implanting in the hearts of believers everywhere.

In the Letter to the Ephesians which we heard moments ago, Paul speaks of the coming of Christ into the world as God's hope of uniting all things in heaven and on earth. This, of course, came as a stunning revelation to Paul who had been a fierce defender of the Hebrew faith and a staunch persecutor of the emerging Christian faith. The thought of working towards unity boggled his mind.

So, for Paul, Epiphany is not some high sounding theological vocabulary word, it is a grassroots strategy for bringing people of differing world views, different ethnicities, differing creeds into one community where justice is extended to all, where peace is the mantra on everyone's lips, and where respect is more than a catchy Aretha Franklin song but is a moral force that transcends national and international boundaries.

I would say Paul is at his best when he writes about the new thing God is doing. He writes about it in an intimately personal way. He is fond of describing his own conversion from being a bigoted religious hothead to being an advocate for finding common ground among people of faith, for coming together as one family of God living as neighbors; God's own sons and daughters choosing to out-do one another in showing kindness.

Bringing Paul's Epiphany to the year 2014 here in South Glastonbury, we see some astounding parallels.

We see in our Tuesday Morning Bible class that Rabbi Craig Marantz feels comfortable and welcome to drop in on any given Tuesday and contribute to the interpretation of Scripture. He has become a beloved co-teacher of this class. When he speaks, it's like the old E.F. Hutton TV ads: people listen! His presence and the easy way we all talk together is an example of Paul's Epiphany, men and women of different religious traditions all seeking the Truth.

I heard that the retiring archbishop of the Hartford Catholic Diocese, Archbishop Mansell, is going to reside just up the hill on Hopewell Road in the St. Augustine parsonage. So I got to imagining Paul's Epiphany living itself out right here in this intersection of Hopewell and Main. What if all 998 of us walked up there and rang his doorbell and sang him a few Christmas carols, gave him a loaf of bread from Harpo's, a hot coffee from So G's, a gift certificate at 2 Hopewell, a pizza from Olympic, and a haircut certificate at Ye Olde Barber Shop! I'm picturing this extravagant welcome! Or we could give the archbishop and old-fashioned pounding. You know . . . a pounding. It's where everyone brings a pound of something for the larder: a pound of bacon, a pound of flour, a pound of peanut butter, a pound of whatever you have on hand. An extravagant welcome! Paul would smile from ear to ear! Whenever divisions give way to unity, God's hope for humanity does a little dance up and down the church aisle.

A few years ago, someone at Hartford Habitat for Humanity had a brilliant idea: to have volunteers from differing faith communities work side by side building a house for a local family.

In addition to building a house, the group would also be building a certain kind of peace! In the first three years, three Houses of Abraham were constructed in Hartford's north end. Jews, Christians, and Muslims sawed boards and hammered nails and built stairs and installed siding and everything else required to erect a home. Because of that, the Mansurs and the Goldmans and the Smiths are great friends now! This became such a popular model for peace-making that the Hindus and the Buddhists and the Bahias all wanted in! So, now, beginning this month, Hartford Habitat is building a house that will be known as The House of Faith, bringing together volunteers from as many as a dozen religious traditions. We all share the values of neighborliness, justice, kindness, and decent housing. We all share the vision for peace. And, in a way, it is a marvelous example of living into the Apostle Paul's vision for unity in heaven and on earth.

An Epiphany came to the Magi two thousand years ago. They saw the star and concluded God must be doing a new thing! The Apostle Paul got knocked off his horse and was blinded for three days and concluded God must be doing a new thing! The new thing is this: the time for unity has come! The time to look at the people on my left and the people on my right and to recognize each one as my sister or my brother.

As you know, I remain in the greatest of hope! Amen!