

## **“Epiphany in the Light of a Chalice”**

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Epiphany. In religious and secular terms, it is a first cousin of revelation. Revelation need not be an angelic chorus bursting forth from the heavens and breaking into song, much as this might be welcome once a year. Revelation need not be the delivery of a sacred text to a singular person, endowing that person with the status of an appointed channel for the language of God or whomever. Revelation and epiphany can well indicate an experience of awe, a momentary experience like an “Aha!” moment, or even an extended experience for some of us who feel called in a particular direction by an inner tug that won’t let go however slow we are to pay attention.

I invite you to open your hearts and minds to what epiphany can mean for you, for us, and for humankind in this slice of history when “the hopes and fears of all the years” are once again in dissonance. Are these matters for our spiritual consideration, our theological discernment, or our political choices? Probably. But that’s for you to decide.

Let’s begin with this morning—actually with this past Friday, January 6<sup>th</sup>. In the Eastern Orthodox world, it’s Christmas, and it’s the Festival of Epiphany. What is being celebrated? The birth of Jesus—actually the manifestation of Jesus as the presumed Son of God, a singular status. And the arrival of the Three Kings, also known as the Magi, who affirmed the identity of the babe of Bethlehem. This is Epiphany as divine manifestation. At this very moment, our children are learning more about this holiday/holy day as celebrated by our neighbors on the other side of the earth and by many not so far away.

But what emerged from our Wonder Box? Three tiny crowns. And who entered this sanctuary from the foyer of our Meeting House? Three delightful women, one of them a child, each a queen. “The Queens Came Late,” as the story goes. They were probably UUs and didn’t know it. They were also practical. Practical is a revelation when it comes to gifts for the newborn babe. Their gender and their gifts were an epiphany to those of who expected otherwise.

How to prepare for an epiphany? One doesn’t, other than to “Expect the unexpected.” Again, I invite you to open your hearts and minds to a manifestation of what you could not and cannot anticipate. When an epiphany arrives in a form of love and grace, it carries the seeds of transformation.

So it was with Derrick Jensen, the environmentalist writer and activist who recounts his experience on a cold January afternoon. Two dogs were dancing at his feet. Some of us know what that’s like—that is, a dog or two dancing at our feet. It’s amazing that Jensen could pay attention to the epiphany that was about to fly overhead. Yet their clamor drew his attention upwards. What surfaced in him? In a whisper, “Godspeed!” He connected with the geese, the formation of wild geese on their journey south. What was happening? A breathtaking connection across species, a reminder that we who are human are intimately connected with the so-called natural world—as if we’re not intrinsically part of it. “Godspeed,” came a voice from the bones of his soul. “Godspeed.” A proclamation of mutual intimacy with a world that calls us home.

In the light of a chalice, it was an epiphany for me when I heard as if for the first time the truth of “the interconnected web of all existence.” It was a revelation with a revolution at its core. If we really took this in, what would our call be in our culture so reluctant to heed a call to the soul? There are differences, clear and cogent differences, in the species we claim as ours. We as humans are not all the same. In this congregation, we are not necessarily kindred spirits. We are various and variable, textured and distinct in upbringing, perspective, and approach to how we live our lives. Yet we are intimately connected with one another, and we are intimately connected with all life. In Rumi’s words: “We are woven.” Rumi was himself an epiphany.

A few weeks ago we celebrated the birth of a child. Christmas we call it. But in the light of a chalice, we know that “Every night a child is born is a holy night.” Each and every child, each and every one of us, was born as an epiphany, a manifestation of love in this world. When anyone tells me that they are pregnant or are adopting a child, I congratulate them, and I add: “Your life will never be the same.” The arrival of a child is an epiphany carrying the seeds of transformation—for the child, for the parents, for the family, for the community, and yes, for the world. I believe that each and every heartbeat sounds however faintly in the wondrously orchestrated song of the universe.

“Star of wonder, star of light,” begins the refrain of the familiar carol. The wonder accompanying whatever epiphanies we have known or will know has variable staying power. Wonder demands a level of attentiveness to which few of us are inclined to sustain. It calls us to let go of whatever is extraneous to the core of that wonder.

We are alive in a culture that suffers mightily from ADD—attention deficit disorder. I don’t use this phrase lightly. I know that it’s a diagnosis. It’s also a description of what we are up against in paying full attention to any possible epiphany, to whatever work or play or conversation we are in the midst of, to deep listening, to total presence. Buddhism refers to mindfulness. Which comes first, mindfulness or patience? Gautama Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree for how long?

I don’t suggest that we head to the nearest tree, but that we open our monkey minds—and there are lots of monkeys in mine—to those manifestations that we cannot anticipate, whether it’s the particular way the glow of a candle reaches our depths on Christmas Eve or a trio of lovely queens coming through the door with gifts the whole family will appreciate or a flock of geese flying in a V with a message given and maybe even received.

What if, just what if, you were presented with ten gift boxes, and you were invited to place in each box something that represented an epiphany in your life. Hold a moment of silence. Reach into that room inside you that you may not have visited for awhile. What has been waiting for you to remember and recognize as a manifestation that carried the stuff of transformation? Through such an experience, your life was turned around, set off in a different direction. Open the door of your heart’s memory.

[moment of silence]

Have you begun to fill your boxes? Each is a gift that you’re unwrapping once again in the recognition of its transforming power.

Just a few days ago I received a message through our website. It wasn't a general message but was directed specifically to me. I was initially surprised that it touched me so deeply, but it did. The more I reflect on it all, the more I recognize it as an epiphany flowing from an epiphany. What am I talking about?

Over 20 years ago Harriett Richie authored a Christmas story called "He'd Come Here." For Christmas Eve 2015 I adapted Harriett's story for this congregation. It was the tale of a young couple with children who found themselves with a yen for breakfast after a late Christmas Eve service at their church. The only place open was a truck stop. They went in and found themselves in the company of a downtrodden looking waitress and a scruffy old man sitting at a booth by himself. The teller of the tale confesses that the snob in her was enjoying feeling out of place, with awful music blaring from the jukebox and tacky lights strung hither and yon.

Then a young couple wandered in with a baby who appeared to be a newborn. The baby started to cry, as babies do. The mother discreetly went off to nurse the child. That done, the baby continued to cry. That downtrodden waitress came over and offered to pick up the baby and "see what she could do." As she cooed and comforted the infant, the scruffy old man picked up the coffee pot and became the waiter. The baby settled down. The teller of the tale was overcome with the realization of how judgmental she had been of these "characters" in the diner. She leaned over to her partner and said, "He'd come here, wouldn't he?" "Who?" asked her partner. "Jesus," came the response. "If Jesus were born in this town tonight and the choices were our neighborhood, the church or this truck stop, it would be here, wouldn't it?"

The tale continues as the couple head home with their children and notice with new awareness their neighbors' homes and the troubles each family on the block had known that year. Their world wasn't as pristine as they had imagined. This was the story I tucked into the heart of my Christmas Eve homily.

I took considerable liberty with Harriet's tale, but when the email arrived six days ago, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January, it was clear that she hadn't been bothered that I had done so.

"Every year after Christmas, I search online to see if my Christmas story 'He'd Come Here' is still out there somewhere," wrote Harriett. "This time I searched by my name and 'Jesus' instead of 'Christmas' and your 2015 message appeared... I continue to be amazed and grateful that the story still seems to have meaning for many people when it reads too 'Christian' for me now. That is, until I read your sermon. Thank you! Thank you for ... the questions you raised—for the people in the truck stop [I had embellished them], ... for saying that of course no one trying to comfort a crying baby would sing Handel."

Harriett noted other specifics of my homily that drew in characters not a part of her original story. She concluded:

"That my story might be read as a singular story has diminished its meaning for me, so thank you most of all for: 'The baby Jesus as we know him, or are meeting him for the first time, need not be a reminder of a singular story spread by ardent followers that led in part to harsh certainties over who he was and why he was.'

May you know hope and joy and love and peace in the new year."

I responded just last night, thanking her for the gift of reaching out, for sharing her experience of what I had done with her story. “Your message is an epiphany, Harriett, and Epiphany is the focus of our worship tomorrow, so I hope it's okay if I share how very much your message meant to me. It is a realization of connection.... What else have you written?”

I wonder if Epiphany in its countless forms is a revelation of connection and if the connection thus manifest holds the seeds of transformation. Was I transformed by this interchange? Yes, though I can't yet explain how. Was the first person teller of Harriett's story transformed by her epiphany at the truck stop? Clearly, and perhaps in some ways that Harriett and I together envisaged.

Again echoing Rumi: “We are woven.” Epiphany does not happen in solitude. The Three Kings, the more or less wise men, arrived in the company of one another. Our three queens, the savvy young women, entered in the company of one another. Was Derrick Jensen really taking a walk all by himself? Did the woman described in Harriett's story experience her epiphany solo? Wasn't it the connection made possible by Harriett's outreach that was at the core of my so recent epiphany?

Ponder the epiphanies you have known. While you may have experienced some in a setting of presumed solitude, with what or whom was a connection forged, a connection wholly unanticipated, a connection that was transformative? Even as your birth was an epiphanal event, so is your life unfolding like a lotus, petals opening unto petals, in ways that perhaps even the Buddha could not have imagined. In the light of a chalice, like the sun that rises in the east, may our way be illumined and our lives transformed by the ultimate epiphany that is love.

So may it be and Amen.

## Sources

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