

Matthew 2: 1 – 12 The Message Bible ~ Isaiah 60:1-6 NRSV

When Love Breaks Through

Epiphany of the Lord ~ January 6, 2019 ~ Communion Meditation

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Introduction to Gospel Text

God's Big Reveal: that's what **Epiphany** is. The word, Epiphany, comes from the Greek, *epiphaneia*, which is translated both as "coming" and as "showing." What is God showing us in this break-through move of coming to earth in the form of a baby named Jesus? And what can this peculiar story of these foreign travelers from the East, who enter and exit the stage in a cloud of mystery, teach us about the revolution kicked off by this revelation of God born to this earth in a manger? Without Matthew's story of the Wisemen or "scholars" as translated in The Message Bible, this backwater birth in Bethlehem would have taken place in utter obscurity, except for a few sleep-deprived shepherds with a crazy story about some angels appearing to them in the dead of night, and what do they know?

Communion Meditation

Happy New Year on this Epiphany Sunday! It's great to see you here 6 days into 2019: our brand new year, and our brand new chance to get it right. How are we doing so far on our New Year's resolutions? If one of your resolutions was to attend church every Sunday this year—Check. You're on your way!

What's on your list of resolutions this year? Back when my husband and I were in our mid-20's we would go out to breakfast at International House of Pancakes around New Year's and write up a list of resolutions on a placemat. "OK, this year we are going to: Watch less TV, Exercise more, Eat out less. Drink more water. Of course after about 4 or 5 years of this, we realized two humiliating truths: 1. Our list was always the same, and 2. We never *really* accomplished these "IHOP placemat resolutions" for more than a couple of weeks. Sound familiar? Maybe the problem was more with our list, than our failure to achieve them. More on that in a minute.

On Christmas, we celebrated the miracle of the Incarnation, The Word made flesh, the birth of Jesus. If you think about it, Christmas was all God: God's plan, God's action, God's miraculous, mysterious, scandalous move: accomplished with the "yes" of Mary and the acceptance of Joseph. But mostly it was God choosing to become one of us, to show us love, to save us. Divine Love breaking through in the form of Jesus. But Epiphany is different. Epiphany is about us and about our response to God's gift of Jesus. Epiphany is more like taking a selfie with our cell phone—something, by the way I really don't do well or willingly. For those of us past 50, selfies are rather humbling, are they not?

But that's Epiphany: the big reveal, wrinkles and all. What do we really see in the radiant light of God's Love breaking through? Epiphany calls us to look up, to notice, to see

what God is up to and then, yes, face the truth of what our world and we are really looking like. Capital “E” Epiphany is the story of the Magi looking up, noticing a strange star, making the trek to find what this could be about and then recognizing yes, this is the one. Small “e” epiphany is up to us, whenever Love breaks through and we see God revealed to us. When Love breaks through, what do we do? Do we notice? Do we live differently having seen Love? Or maybe we prefer to look the other way. Epiphany shifts the lens to our response whenever God, who is Love, breaks through.

Let’s think back to those New Year’s resolutions: are they Epiphany-worthy? Here’s the right question I believe God is calling us to ask: What could I do, what could we do, in this year of 2019 to let the Divine Love of Christ break through the thick darkness in our hearts and in this world? We know Christ came to bring peace on earth, to reconcile, to reunite broken humanity. How are we doing on that intention?

If we think back over the last hundred years, since Margie Fornefelt’s birthday on January 6, 1919: we have made huge strides forward in medicine and science, civil rights, and global communication, just to name a few. At the same time, thinking back over 2018, it seems like we are getting better and better at creating our own little worlds, isolating ourselves from people who are different than we are, becoming more polarized than ever. As a country we have become less unified, less reconciled, more suspicious, more broken.

Today we are two weeks into a partial government shut down, upending the lives of 800,000 federal workers, over a political impasse for which we must all take responsibility. Two million people woke up this morning incarcerated in our prison system, many of whom are behind bars because of misdemeanors for which they cannot pay the fine. Every fifteen minutes a USA baby is born with neonatal abstinence syndrome. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, in our world today, one person is forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution. Racism has become more overt and hate crimes are clearly on the rise. From the hurricanes in Florida’s panhandle to the wildfire in Paradise, California, these disasters signal the present and future threat to our entire ecosystem. Didn’t Jesus come to show us, to reveal to us, a better way?

One clear take away from the political events of 2018 is that we are not listening to each other. Most of us choose to surround ourselves in the comfort of people who think like we do and reinforce our sense of being right. Within the company of our “homies” we can reassure one another those other people must be wrong. The ones who are different from us. The “not us” people.

Here’s where the story of the three wise men, the three star gazers gets really relevant, really quickly. Whether there were 2 or 10 of them, we know for sure that these wise men were foreign Gentiles. That means they were not Jews in a binary narrative where everyone is

a Jew or a Not-Jew a.k.a., Gentile. These “Not-Jews” from the East trekked to a foreign country, knelt down to pay homage to a baby, that they recognized as king of another religion. A religion clearly that discounted their work as astrologers, diviners, or magi. The Old Testament forbade divination and astrology (Deut. 4:9, 18:9-13, Isa. 47:13). Yet this did not stop Herod and his religious advisors from consulting these men or from believing what the magi told them.

The real mystery of our Epiphany story is the inclusion of Gentiles among God’s people: outsiders are included in the mystery of the Incarnation. In fact, it was the outsiders who brought the Big Reveal to light! But they didn’t do it alone. Did you notice how the magi needed to work together with the local chief priests and scribes to find the child? The magi had to stop and ask for directions from King Herod who had to ask his religious advisors. No one could put it all together without “the other.” This story reveals this truth: No one has all the pieces of the puzzle, all the cards in the deck, except God, who has dealt us all in. Living into that reality takes humility, and it takes listening to people not like us.

Back to my question: What could we do this year to let the Divine Love of Christ break through the thick darkness in our hearts and in this world? I have two very specific, epiphany-inspired and epiphany-worthy resolutions to suggest this year. They come from a TED Talk, given by Elizabeth Lesser, author and co-founder of the Omega Institute. My first suggestion is also the title of her TED Talk: “Take the Other to Lunch.”ⁱⁱ

Yes: this year try to get to know one person from a group you have negatively stereotyped, or just don’t know or understand very well. We all have them. If you are a Republican, take a Democrat to lunch. If you are a Democrat, take a Republican to lunch. If you are a Christian, take a Muslim or a Jew to lunch, or a secular humanist or Atheist. If you are straight, take someone who is gay or Lesbian to lunch. If you are older, take a younger adult to lunch, and vice versa. You get the idea. You know who your “others” are. Take one of them to lunch, with the simple goal to listen to one another, to try your best to listen to his or her story and share yours. That is all: no persuading, arguing or judging. It’s just lunch. View Elizabeth Lesser’s TED Talk for her helpful, specific guidelines for actually doing this.

If this sounds a little scary or awkward, it is. But you are also opening the way for Love to break through. It may sound like a very small act in the river of misunderstanding that has breached the banks and is still rising. But I believe that one bite at a time, one “I hear you” at a time, can help us, can help earth to breathe again. Believe me when I say that small moves in one direction or another can lead to huge consequences. Here’s what happens: when Love breaks through even a tiny crack, Jesus lives again, right in that moment.

The second challenge is related. Work on becoming an “I *don't* know it all” in 2019. Yes, this is more of a general attitudinal shift, but it will help your lunch project to go better. This is a great way to remind ourselves that we are not the center of the universe, because we *don't* know it all. We don't hold all the cards or the soul angle on the way forward. None of us does. This is a spiritual practice: to work on emptying ourselves of our false sense of divinity. Picture the Wisemen kneeling at the manger. We can hear better from our knees.

Let's begin right now, by letting Jesus take us to lunch (so to speak) at this table, the Lord's table. Listen to him, talk to him: Love breaking through in the form of Jesus, at this table. It seems so small, this meal we are about to partake. A small chunk of bread, dipped in juice or wine. Let it, be the Bread of Life, the Cup of Salvation breaking through, as you taste it. Feel its texture in your mouth, swallow it, think about it becoming a part of your blood stream. Love and Light breaking in to heal and give you hope. Love and light that can crack through the paralysis of despair, loneliness, selfishness, greed, that are afflicting us. When Love breaks through, Jesus Lives again.

Best of all: At this table we don't need to know it all, or pretend we do. We don't need to have it all figured out. We don't need to have a plan in place or a list on a placemat. Jesus invites you, doubts and all, to come to his Table where your place is already set. Come as you are, just come. Let this be the year when Love breaks through.

ⁱ <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

ⁱⁱ http://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_lesser_take_the_other_to_lunch?language=en