

Arise, shine; for your light has come

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany marks the manifestation of God as incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ. For Western Christians, like us, this manifestation takes place to a group of Gentiles, the magi, who are guided to the birthplace of the Christ child by an unusually bright star. These magi were educated men, perhaps astrologers or magicians, from a priestly caste.

For Eastern Christians, Epiphany is the manifestation of God to the world through Jesus' baptism. Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate the baptism event because it is one of only 2 times in the Bible when all 3 persons of the Trinity are made manifest simultaneously to the world. The skies open and God the creator is heard speaking from the heavens while God the Son is being baptized and God the Holy Spirit descends from heaven in the form of a dove.

Matthew is the only gospel that mentions the journey of the magi, and nowhere does it say that there are 3 of them. Maybe we assume that there are 3 of them because of the 3 types of gifts they bring – gold, frankincense and myrrh. In the ancient world, gold was symbolic of royalty and the burning of frankincense was associated with the ceremonial worship of a deity. Liquid myrrh was used in the anointing of priests before performing sacrifices. So, the magi bring gifts for a child who is at once a king, a god and a priest. However, myrrh was also used in the preparation of dead bodies for burial. Perhaps these wise men foreshadowed Christ's fate as both priest and sacrifice. The association of myrrh with death is also significant given the slaughter that takes place following the magi's visit to the holy family.

Even though they were not Jewish, it is likely that these magi from the east were familiar with the Messianic prophesies of the Jews, since a number of Jews did not return from exile, but stayed in the regions in and around Babylonia, where the magi would have encountered them. This might be why they interpret the appearance of the extraordinary star as a sign that a Jewish Messiah had come.

Present-day Christians from different parts of the world mark Epiphany with a variety of traditions such as singing, parades, light shows, and present-giving. In places like Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece and Russia, one Orthodox tradition is for the priest to throw crucifixes in the water for frigid swimmers to retrieve. This ceremony is considered a blessing of the water in memory of Jesus' baptism.

These customs are celebratory in nature, marking the appearance of God in physical form in the person of Jesus. But the epiphany story isn't just about a trip from Babylonia to Bethlehem to meet a special baby. It is also a horror story. My family just returned from Mexico where they bake a traditional bread at Epiphany called Rosca de Reyes. It is made in the shape of a wreath or crown with a baby figurine hidden inside it to represent the need to hide Jesus from Herod.

On the road to Bethlehem, the magi stop in at the courts of Herod the Great and, for some reason, they tell him that they are on their way to visit the new king of the Jews. This news obviously poses a threat to Herod's own kingship. (These supposedly *wise* men didn't think that one through very well.) Herod asks the magi to return after their visit to tell him the exact location of the child so that he can worship him too. Luckily, an angel appears to the magi in a dream and tells them to take an alternate route home because of Herod's hidden intentions. Herod is furious and demands that all male children in the vicinity under the age of 2 be murdered. But Joseph also has a dream that he is to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt to avoid this gruesome fate.

The Catholic Church venerates these murdered children as the first Christian martyrs.

The epiphany story is filled with emotional ups and downs. On the one hand, the visit of the magi is a joyful occasion when God's glory enters the world through his son. And, on the other hand, this does not mean that all is well in the world. It is a politically violent time and Jesus and his family are forced to flee to a distant land to avoid his death at the hands of a vicious ruler.

Both of our scripture passages from Matthew and Isaiah are about leaving and returning home under difficult circumstances. The magi leave home to visit the infant Jesus and then they return home a different way due to an angelic warning. Mary and Joseph are forced to leave home until the one who wants to kill their son is dead himself.

Our passage from Isaiah alludes to the despair experienced by the Jews who have recently come back to Palestine after their Babylonian exile only to find Jerusalem, their holy city, and its temple, in ruins. Images of present-day Aleppo, Syria come to mind. You can search for before and after photographs of Aleppo online. It is devastating.

For the post-exilic Jews, what should have been a joyful homecoming – a long-awaited fulfilment of the covenant – is replaced with a feeling of utter hopelessness. And, yet, in the midst of the rubble, God says, “arise, shine; for your light has come!”

Images of light and dark symbolize these dissonant states in Matthew and Isaiah. In Matthew, the bright star guides the magi to the place of the Lord. It helps them to see the way to their destination, much like the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night in Exodus, guiding the Israelites out of the wilderness. And Isaiah says, “See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (60:2-3). God’s epiphany light is a universal light – a welcoming light, shining not only for the Jews, but for everyone to see. For Matthew, it is imperative that God manifests God’s self to the Gentiles, represented by the magi, in order to highlight God’s inclusive nature.

So, how do we access this epiphanic light during the longest nights of our year? How do we see God’s glory in the here and now when we feel despair over our political conditions, over the yawning gap between rich and poor and over the dire condition of our environment? Where is our star or our pillar of fire guiding us through the darkness?

Until now, I have been talking about a biblical understanding of epiphany. And I think that this biblical context speaks to systemic injustice and the need for courage and organized action in a powerful way.

But I think that epiphany simultaneously holds some psychological insights for us, about how to get through those dark nights of the soul. In addition to its biblical meanings, the word “epiphany” can also be defined as a moment of profound understanding or clarity – an enlightenment. An epiphany can be seen as a spiritual realization in which God’s light shines within us and overcomes the darkness.

A book that has influenced me profoundly is *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* by Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst. She looks at depression in the context of art, literature and philosophy. One of the paintings that she analyzes is “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb” by early 16th century German artist Hans Holbein the Younger. It is a shockingly intimate portrait of Jesus’ body lying lifeless within a sealed coffin, already in the early stages of decay with no hint of the possibility of resurrection. It is a dead Christ truly forsaken by the Father.

For Kristeva, this painting is a profound representation of depression, which she describes as “radical atheism”. The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky was so disturbed by the painting that he included a discussion of it in his novel *The Idiot*. One of the characters says: “Why, some people may *lose their faith* looking at that picture!” Kristeva asks, “If such a corpse was seen by all His disciples, by His future chief apostles, by the women who followed Him and stood by the cross, by all who believed in Him and worshipped Him, then how could they possibly have believed, confronted with such a sight, that this martyr would rise again?”¹

Holbein’s painting comes to mind when I go to visit my dad’s grave. He is buried in a beautiful cemetery outside of the small village of Roseville on the grounds of the historic Detweiler Mennonite Meetinghouse. His grave stone is not shiny or symmetrical. It is a rough, strangely shaped rock from our childhood backyard. Engraved on it are the words “Now I See”. My dad was prone to deep bouts of depression, and when he was suffering, it was very hard for him to see his way out. Depression, for him, was like a spiritual death. Our family chose the words “Now I See” for his gravestone because we like to think that he is finally free of this blinding darkness and now sees through eyes of light.

You may recognize the words “Now I See” from the #1 hymn on the billboard charts since 1779 – *Amazing Grace*. But how many of you know the history of this hymn and the man who wrote it? It was written by an Englishman named John Newton, who was in the Royal Navy and later became a clergyman. He was deeply skeptical about religion and mocked the pious. His nickname was “The Great Blasphemer” and one of his captains described him as the most profane man he’d ever met. I think my dad would’ve gotten a kick out of the fact that he is quoted on his grave.

Newton deserted the navy and then became a slave trader. He so displeased his new captain that he sold Newton himself into slavery in Sierra Leone. Finally, Newton’s dad sent someone to liberate him and Newton set sail on the ship *Greyhound*, bound for his home in England. At one point, a violent storm hit the ship, tore the sails and swept some of the shipmates overboard. In his desperation, Newton tied himself to the helm of the ship and began to pray to God for mercy. The ship and its remaining crew eventually made it to shore. Although he did not change his ways immediately, this moment was an epiphany for him and led to a

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 107.

gradual change of character and conversion of faith. The song Amazing Grace comes out of his personal experiences.

An epiphany doesn't have to be a sudden conversion experience. It can be a long slog towards enlightenment. For John Newton, the journey toward epiphany was perilous and slow, but that desperate prayer in the midst of the storm awakened in him what Zen Buddhists call "the beginner's mind".

Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi said, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's, there are few." In order to prepare a place within ourselves for God's light to be made manifest, we too can practice beginner's mind. We too can become fresh and awake. For example, when you meet someone you know, whether you like them or dislike them or are indifferent to them, you encounter them with preconceived notions. What if you were to see them through a beginner's mind? Without judgment or expectation, notice their good heart, their struggles, and be grateful for who they are right now. Cultivate curiosity. Cultivate the "I don't know" mind.

The magi, to me, are a wonderful example of this. They are learned, wise men. And yet, they set aside their erudition and expertise and travel to a foreign land to worship a baby of all things.

In conclusion, I'd like to share a story with you about St. Francis of Assisi as seen through the eyes of Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. He writes:

One day, while doing walking meditation during winter in his garden, St. Francis of Assisi saw a bare almond tree. He approached the almond tree...and asked the almond tree to tell him about God. Suddenly the almond tree was covered with blossoms. I believe the story to be true because such a contemplative could see into the depth of reality. He did not need to have the warmth of spring in order to realize that the almond blossoms were already there.²

This morning, I've tried to explore some of the many meanings of epiphany: epiphany as both a series of biblical narratives about God becoming manifest in the midst of displacement and violence and epiphany as an awakening to the beauty in our midst everyday despite all evidence to the contrary. We may experience God as distant, or even absent, at times, or even *most* of the time, but when we see through the eyes of faith, and cultivate our beginner's mind, then we, too, might see resurrection within death and that the almond blossoms are already in full

² Thich Nhat Hanh, *no death, no fear*, p. 77.

bloom, even though the winter nights are at their longest. In the words of Isaiah:
“Arise, shine; for your light has come!...Lift up your eyes and look around; Then
you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.”