

A sermon delivered by
The Rev'd David W. Fleenor, S.T.M.
"Eureka, Aha, Epiphany!"

The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Sunday, January 7, 2006
The Feast of the Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6, 9
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12
Psalm 72 or 72:1-2, 10-17

Access the readings by clicking on this link:
<http://www.io.com/~kellywp/YearABC/Epiphany/Epiph.html>

Archimedes Story

The king wanted a new crown – one made of pure gold. So he gathered up the gold from his treasury and commissioned an artisan to make it for him. After a period of time the artisan came to the king and presented him the crown that he had crafted. The king was generally pleased but a bit suspicious. He had a sneaking suspicion that the artisan had somehow duped him. He thought that the artisan may have mixed in to the crown a portion of silver – a lesser metal – so that he could keep some of the gold for himself. But the king did not know how to prove it. So he called up his trusted advisor, the Greek mathematician Archimedes. The king shared his suspicion with Archimedes and asked that he find a way to prove it.

Archimedes thought about the dilemma for some time but made no progress in solving it. On one particular day he went to a public bath. Upon entering the bath he noticed that when he stepped in water spilled out. And all of a sudden he figured it out. He solved the king's dilemma. He discovered that as he immersed himself in the tub, not only did the water level rise, but his apparent weight seemed to decrease. He realized that two objects of equal weight will displace different volumes of water when immersed unless their densities are equal. This is now known as Archimedes principle.

It is said that Archimedes leapt from the bath and ran naked through the streets shouting, "Eureka! Eureka!" (I have found it! I have found it!).¹

¹ Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *Rousseau and Revolution: A History of Civilization in France, England, and Germany from 1756, and in the Remainder of Europe from 1715 to 1789*. The story was accessed at <http://www.anecdotage.com/index.php?aid=11989>.

Brain Research

Others refer to this as an “Aha” moment. Scientists have now located the area of the brain that shows increased activity when we have one – the right temporal lobe. It is the area of the brain where we tie together different pieces of information that we already know. We don’t recognize how they are related until the “Aha” moment.²

Epiphany

Some call it Eureka; others call it the “Aha” moment. In the Church we call it Epiphany. Today we celebrate the Epiphany. It is always on January 6th, which was yesterday, but we move it to the nearest Sunday, which is today. The word epiphany means “to manifest.” The story that illustrates it is the one we heard in the Gospel lesson just moments ago. The Magi follow a star that leads them to the baby Jesus and they discover that he is the Messiah, the Christ-child. This is an epiphany.

Epiphany is about the manifestation, appearance, or revelation of Jesus to the Magi. More broadly speaking, it is the revelation of the Divine One to all of humanity; not just the Jews, but even the Gentiles.

Epiphany is when humanity collectively had an “aha” moment that the Christ child was indeed God and savior of the world. That, in part, is what the celebration of the Epiphany is about.

Theophany

Some have argued for another name for this day: theophany.³ I like it much better.

Definition: A theophany is an appearance of God.

Examples: Examples of theophanies are:

1. Adam and Eve hearing God walking through the garden in the cool of the day.⁴
2. Moses and the burning bush. Initially Moses saw the angel of the Lord in the burning bush that was not consumed. As he got closer the Lord himself called out to him from the bush and announced that it was indeed God.⁵
3. Jesus, God incarnate appearing as a human to the world.

² Jennifer Warner, “[Brain Activity Differs When Creative Insight Takes Hold](#),” *WebMD*, 13 April 2004. Cf. Lee Dye, “[Researchers Map Brain’s Inspiration Point](#),” *ABCNEWS.COM*, 21 April 2004.

³ The Orthodox Church in America refers to January 6th as the [Feast of the Theophany](#) and it commemorates the baptism of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:9-11 and Matthew 3:13-17).

⁴ [Genesis 3:8](#)

⁵ [Exodus 3](#)

These are all examples of theophanies. It is not likely, however, that you and I will have access to such great appearances of God. How many of you have seen God walking in a garden or in burning bush that was not consumed?

But it is possible to see God or for God to manifest God's self to us. How? In every human being that you see God's image is resident in him or her. We are all created in the image of God. That is the primary way we see God on a daily basis.

Tutu - The Image of God

Desmond Tutu believes this and provides us with two great illustrations:⁶

First, in the ancient world the sovereign could not be present simultaneously everywhere in his domain, so he had statues set up around his realm. These were his image and likeness and his subjects paid homage and reverence to the statue as if to the monarch himself. Thus the assertion that we are each created in God's image and likeness is a staggering claim which the Bible makes on our behalf. It is to claim that each one of us is in fact God's representative, God's stand-in, God's viceroy. The OT prohibited any images to be made of the God the Israelites worshipped b/c there could really be only one – the human person.

Second, we are taught that each one of us is a temple of the Holy Spirit; we are tabernacles indwelt by the most holy and blessed Trinity. In some of our churches we have a sanctuary lamp that alerts the worshipper that the Reserved Sacrament is kept in the tabernacle. We then genuflect as we pass the tabernacle in addition to reverencing the altar. Strictly speaking, Tutu says, if we took our theology seriously we would not just greet each other. No, we would genuflect before each other b/c we would be acknowledging that we are God's viceroys, tabernacles indwelt by God.

It is not likely that we will see God in the form of a baby with his mother like the Magi did. It is unlikely that we will see God walking in the garden in the cool of the day or in a burning bush. But we see a theophany every time we see another human being.

Buber – I/Thou

Because it is socially inappropriate to genuflect or bow every time we greet one another in American culture, what are we to do?

Simply put, love one another.

Seek out the image of God in the other person and love him or her with all your heart, mind, and soul.

This is no easy task, especially if we are to attempt it on everyone we encounter. It could be exhausting! But it is a task that the Gospel calls us to. We are called, as our baptismal

⁶ Desmond Tutu, "Why as Christians We Must Oppose Racism," *St. Mark's Review* 162 (Winter 1995): 4.

covenant states, “to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving [o]ur neighbor as [o]urselves.”⁷

One way to think of doing this is to use Martin Buber’s concept of “I & You.”⁸ Buber asserted that we could adopt two attitudes to the world: I-It or I-You.

I-It is a relationship of subject to object, person to thing.

I-You is a relationship of subject to subject, person to person.

In other words, I-It is characterized by emotional indifference; it is when we treat another person as a means to an end.

I-You, by contrast, is characterized by emotional connectedness; the person is an end in his or herself.

To seek and serve Christ in all persons means to strive for the I-You attitude.

To adopt the I-You attitude is to seek to enter and understand another person’s inner reality.

Daniel Goleman – Illustration from Social Intelligence

Daniel Goleman in his book *Social Intelligence* recounts overhearing the following conversation in a restaurant.⁹

“My brother has terrible luck with women. His first marriage was a disaster. He is 39 and a nerd. He’s got terrific technical skills, but zero social skills. Lately he’s been trying speed dating. Single women sit at tables and the men move from table to table spending exactly five minutes talking with each woman. A bell rings at five minutes and they rate each other to indicate if they might want to get together. If they do then they exchange email addresses to arrange a meeting another time. But my brother ruins his chances! I know just what he does. As soon as he sits down he starts talking about himself non-stop. I am sure he never asks the woman a single question. He’s never had one say she wants to see him again.”

Goleman continues, “For the same reason, Opera singer Allison Charney employed a dating test. She counted the amount of time it took before her date asked her a question with the word “you” in it. On her first date with Adam Epstein – the man she married a year later – she didn’t even have time to start the clock. He aced the test. That test looks for a person’s capacity for attuning – for wanting to enter and understand another person’s inner reality.”

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 305.

⁸ Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970.

⁹ Goleman, Daniel. *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*. New York: Audio Renaissance, 2006. (N.B.: I listened to the abridged audio book version. These stories are found on CD #2 of 5, track 28.)

The difference between the unlucky brother and the emotionally attuned Adam Epstein is the difference between the I-It and I-You. The brother never attempted to enter into the other women's inner realities, but Epstein did. And a connection was made and both Allison and Adam felt like they "got" each other. Some people refer to this when they remark, "When I talked to him, *he just got me.*"

I believe Jesus was a master at this. Recall the woman at the well.¹⁰ Jesus entered into her inner reality and a connection was made. It was a connection that humanized her. Jesus entered into her inner reality and the result was that she felt a deeper connection, not only to Jesus, but to her self.

This is the paradox of our faith: God became fully human so that we could live fully into our humanity. By entering into another person inner reality in an unguarded and unpretentious way we humanize the other and are humanized in the process. As one theologian put it, "To be truly godly, is to be fully human."¹¹

This is really the center point of my understanding of God, the Church, my self and others. My early religious experiences in conservative Christian churches¹² led me to believe that my humanity – and all that goes along with it – was something to be escaped, not embraced. I was led to believe that to be spiritual meant to discard the human in pursuit of higher things. This message – "to be truly godly, is to be fully human" – upended all of that for me and it is, in large part, why I am an Episcopalian today. God explicitly blessed our humanity in the garden when he declared the first human good. He implicitly blessed our humanity when He became one of us and took on human form.

I don't want to get into another sermon, but suffice it to say that the Gospel calls us to reject the dehumanization of others and embrace the enhumanization of all people, including ourselves.

Conclusion

Theophanies – the appearances of God – most readily occur when we, like the Magi, go looking for Christ. Follow that star, follow that light and let it lead you into the eyes of another human being. And there you shall see God.

May this season of Epiphany be full of theophanies for all of us as we seek to serve Christ in all persons.

Postscript

After preaching this sermon several parishioners asked if I had read Peter Steinfeld's article entitled [*At Armenian Churches, a Distinct Observance Today*](#) on the topic of Epiphany/Theophany in the January 6, 2007 edition of the New York Times. I had not.

¹⁰ [John 4:1-26](#)

¹¹ Author unknown.

¹² This includes the Southern Baptist Church and the Pentecostal Church of God.

It is a very good article and I commend it to you. Click on the title above to access it via the Internet.