

The Third Church Pulpit
Sermons from Third Presbyterian Church
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“21st Century Epiphanies”

Lynette Sparks

January 6, 2019



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Epiphany of the Lord

Matthew 2:1–12

Have you ever experienced an epiphany...a divine revelation? What was it? Was it something on the scale of difficult math homework, where you work and agonize, and erase your failed solutions time and time again until something clicks and you finally get it? For surely solving complicated math problems requires divine revelation, at least for some of us! My husband Brad's family had two clubs: MFE – Math for Everyone, and STOMP – Stomp Out Math Pronto.

Or was your epiphany something more? Was it something that changed the way you look at the world, or yourself, or especially, something that caused you to see something of God in a way you hadn't seen before?

That's the question I wonder about the wise men, even though they didn't just stumble upon the child who would be Messiah of the world. They'd diligently studied the stars, they'd noted the words of the ancient prophets, they paid attention and followed the star that would lead them to Bethlehem. Their journey was intentional, disciplined, persistent. A great model for us all.

But I wonder if the Messiah they saw is what they expected. Somehow, I suspect not. After they left, I wonder if they began to understand more about what they had just seen, and if it changed them. For even more than their precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the heart of this story, the part on which everything else hinges, is the Epiphany of the Lord himself – the shining revelation of God to all of humanity, to turn the world as we know it upside down.

Because that's what epiphanies do.

One of my most significant ones came on a flight somewhere between Seattle and Buffalo, in February of 2005. Long story short, I was returning from the annual conference of the Association of Christian Educators. Even though I'd done that work for a couple of years, I found myself struggling with faith itself, the teachings of my upbringing, with all these people who claimed to love Jesus but kept lobbing insults at one another. And I began to wonder if I couldn't save myself a lot of time and aggravation, let alone Sunday mornings, if I ditched the whole thing. Yet at the same time I felt compelled to serve in the church. Before I left the conference, the title of a book for sale said exactly what I was feeling: it was titled, "Jesus Drives Me Crazy". So I bought it, and read it on the flight home. And the author described an understanding of the Trinity that was a profound epiphany for me – what that is is a topic for another day. But it allowed me to re-embrace faith in a deeper way, to hear the call to attend seminary, and eventually land here.

Mine is only one small story in the vast library of God's ongoing revelation of God's self to the world.

A few weeks ago five of our amazing Third Church youth reflected on today's Scripture with me. Harrison, Juliana, Julia, Caitlin, and Sophie, I hope I do justice to the conversation we had, which went something like this: Have you ever had an epiphany? "Yes, at the Montreat Youth Conference," worshiping with youth from around the country. What was that epiphany like? "My heart was happy," one said. Well, What does it take to feel happy? "To feel safe," one said, and they all nodded. Well, what is it that frightens you? And they described the deep anxiety they and their friends experience during active shooter drills at school, and watching a classmate sob in fear just from practicing the drill itself. They described the anxieties of school, body image, being excluded, and being bullied on the soccer team.

And even in the midst of all that, epiphanies still come; God's presence still breaks through – like at Camp Cory, they said, during evening prayer, with the youth counselors wrapped up together in a fuzzy blanket – they called it a "counselor burrito," and they said it was a genuine epiphany – the revelation that God was with them, that in the midst of all these other anxieties they felt safe in the bonds of

their church community, literally and figuratively wrapped in a blanket of love. They belonged.

Our youth inspired me. They inspired me to do a little crowdsourcing via the Third Church Community Facebook group (join if you haven't), as well as other friends, and ask, Have you ever experienced an epiphany? And you responded with your own deep and profound stories. I share names if they have given me permission to do so.

Some epiphany stories actually involve churches.

Sheila Elliott told of a time over 30 years ago when another Associate Pastor asked if she would consider going along to Pittsburgh for a few days of Logos experience/training when her children were young. "I said YES, thinking what and why am I saying yes to do this?! Little did I know God was calling me into "Ministry " with the children of...12 Corners Presbyterian Church. Such a treasured and Cherished Gift helping to coordinate and grow a program for 8 years. I will always be grateful..."

Sarah Krug's epiphany came from a controversial experience about 40 years ago. "We lived on the Southern Border at the time," she said, "and I was working VBS. We had lots of children pre-registered so we were "at capacity" for the program. On the first morning, a pick-up truck from across the border pulled up...with about 8 children eager and excited for our VBS. Of course, they became part of the program regardless of the capacity; we just moved things around and spent time outside in bigger spaces. However, I was reprimanded for "breaking the rules" and told I was not a good Presbyterian. My response: I prefer to be a faithful Christian and invite the stranger in. To this day, I'm sure there are those who roll their eyes at rule breakers; however, I'm grateful to those who have a different understanding."

Other epiphanies come after an injury or illness or a death:

Kathy Kemp wrote about the time, back in 2001, when she fell ice skating, crushed a vertebrae in her back, and ended up with a pulmonary embolism. "I was in a turtle shell cast for two months and much rehab," she said, "however the tipping point was the embolism-- When the Dr discovered it- my husband was asked if I had a DNR because if not treated immediately I could die. Needless to say I am still here, but everyday is a blessing and I know God had more work for me to do on this earth. I

read devotions every day even if I don't get to church regularly and I know God and all his angels are watching over me."

Mary Ann Rutkowski shared her story of watching a two year old and her family as they navigated through her leukemia treatments. "I don't think I ever prayed for anything so hard in my life than for her bone marrow transplant... to be successful. It was for a short time, but she died a couple months later. It really made me learn "how" to pray better and dispelled that "everything happens for a reason" stuff that so many feel is true. But it also opened the door to so many more questions on an even deeper level for me."

A relative of mine wrote about the impact of her mother's death and of her own divorce, and how they helped her to understand what others go through, and become less judgmental.

And then there are everyday epiphanies. A member who prefers to remain anonymous reflected: "I think that we can experience epiphanies every day if we are open to them. Throughout my day, when I remember to look for God with me, and feel that peace and presence, it is always an experience without words. When I first began to experience God's presence, it was a much more extraordinary experience! Now it is just a little less surprising...I think the greatest gift has been realizing who I am. I am "nothing", a grain of sand; the grass that withers and fades, and yet I am everything to God! I am a part of something so much more than me; part of the Kingdom..., despite my faults and limitations and doubts... I am nothing but a servant of God, which is everything, and allows me to be all of who I am. It is difficult to hold this "knowing", but when I do, I believe I am better able to serve, however I am called in that moment."

And finally, there was this short response from a college mate, who I hadn't spoken to in person in over 10 years: "Sometimes I thought they were (epiphanies) and in the long run, they weren't. But the "real" ones": (they were) my son being diagnosed with autism and my "gifted and talented at a national level" daughter being diagnosed with schizophrenia."

What did she mean by that? Would she share more? It's too hard to write, she said. Call me. So I did. Here's what she told me, paraphrased: "The world is different than

I thought it was – what I used to think success and being normal was. My autistic adult son and I just got back from the Roadhouse, a local motorcycle bar. I used to think places like that were to be avoided. But everybody there knows my son, and cares about him.”

“I remember when I first walked in to my son’s special education center – I thought, oh no, my son is going to be one of “those people.” But now I love going there – they all see the world differently. I learned that as my son grew and became one of “those people,” they’re the coolest people around. So the people I used to look up to, now I just think – “whatever.” And the people I used to look down on in some way, I don’t any more because I know that there’s something about them that I’ve never looked for and never seen.”

And what about her daughter with an Ivy League PhD who’s won every award there is and has a serious mental illness? “That one I’m still figuring out,” she said. “When she got all these awards, it felt like they were partly mine. But now I’m willing to let her be her. And when I do things for people I’m not doing it for myself, but because of what I can learn from them, which won’t be what I used to think. But it’s going to open my eyes again and help me see the world differently. That’s how I would define epiphany – seeing the whole world completely differently. And, not necessarily in terms of better in the way I used to understand better. I used to think it was going to change my life for the good. No, it’s going to change my life. Faith means I decide it’s going to be for the good.”

The theme I hear running through every single one of these stories is that epiphanies come right smack in the middle of the trials and troubles and struggles of our lives. Every single one. They’re particular to each person, yet they are there.

And though it’s easy to forget when most of the time we encounter the the wise men in children’s Christmas pageants, the truth is it’s no different in Matthew’s story. The Messiah comes to earth and God is revealed when all is not right with the world. It’s right there, behind the first six words of today’s text: “In the time of King Herod,” an unstable, paranoid leader steeped in his own fears of rival threats, who used the tools of violence and exploitation. It was a time of deep fear for anyone living in that unpredictable world. And the remarkable revelation of God’s love for

humanity came then, and continues to come today, even in the midst of our deepest places of fear and unpredictability.

And in telling our own epiphany stories, we too, bear witness to the Word made flesh, that dwells among us. So tell those stories to one another – after church, in coffee hour, at lunch. And tell them to yourselves. What better way to celebrate the revelation of God come to earth? Amen.

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