

SERMON ON THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY  
St. James Episcopal Church  
San Francisco, California  
January 13, 2008

By Elizabeth Nelson

*Lectionary: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-4:1*

The church year has Jesus growing up fast. Last week he was a baby in Bethlehem, being visited by the Magi; this week he's a grown man at the Jordan River, being baptized by John. Every year at this time, we hear those same two stories one after another. One reason that we do is because we're still very close to the Feast of the Epiphany, and in the most ancient Christian tradition there are *three* Epiphany stories about Jesus that are all supposed to be remembered as part of that Feast.

One is the story we celebrated last week—the one about the Three Kings, the one you probably think of when you think of Epiphany. Another is the story about the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine—the first miracle-story in the Gospel of John. And the third Epiphany story is the one we heard today: about Jesus being baptized in the Jordan, and Heaven opening up to let the Holy Spirit light on him and to let the Voice of God call him Son and Beloved.

So, how and why are these Epiphany stories?

That question begs another one: what's an epiphany? I went and looked it up, like a good dictionary-lover. There are several definitions,

and each one has several parts. But two phrases in particular jumped off the page:

- an epiphany is a sudden perception of the essential nature or meaning of something; *and*,
- an epiphany is an appearance or manifestation of a divine being.

What does an epiphany look like? Well, the first kind, the sudden perception of essential meaning, probably looks a lot like today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, with Peter smacking his forehead and saying, "Hey, I get it—all the stuff Jesus told us about God's love is meant for the Jews *and* the Gentiles!" That kind of epiphany, the forehead-smacking kind, has its own mystery and its own excitement; that kind of epiphany can absolutely be a way for God's Spirit to work in human hearts and human lives. That's a kind of epiphany that rational animals like us can take in without too much trouble. It may surprise us, in fact it usually does, but—how do I say this?—it doesn't freak us out. We don't have to rewrite what happened in order for our rational minds to digest it.

But oh, now, think about those other stories, the three stories in particular about Jesus that for centuries have been considered stories of Epiphany. Think about three Gentile astronomers at the end of a long journey, falling on their knees in front of a baby born to Jewish peasants and offering him gifts meant for a king. Think about a wedding host sipping at a cup full of the best wine he ever tasted, and staring into the face of the guest who told him just a minute ago to fill up all his wine jugs with water. Think about Jesus walking into the Jordan River toward John, and before the heavens were even opened

John could see Jesus for what he was ... and then the water, and then the Spirit, and then that Voice.

These are not rational stories. These stories are intended—in a good way—to freak us out. These are stories of Epiphany with a capital E, stories that describe Divinity manifesting itself to us – in profound mystery on the one hand, and in everyday, sensory, incarnational fact on the other. Look at this baby. Taste this wine. Listen to that voice. God is here, writing names in the stars and lighting up a newborn’s face. God is here, transforming the ordinary and the necessary into the intoxicating. God is here, speaking the language Jesus knows, laying the foundation for Jesus’ mission with words that are the foundation of all tenderness and all possibility: You’re my child, I love you, I delight in you.

*God is here.*

The story of our religion is a long, long series of stories about epiphanies—both kinds, the rational and the supernatural. That’s because the story of our religion, from Abraham to Jesus to this moment here and now, is the story of incarnation, of God manifesting God’s self in and through the soul and the stuff of what God creates. Different Christians have different levels of comfort with our epiphany stories. Some of us want to translate all the stories into metaphors for rational insight, or at least intuition. Some of us want to validate all the stories as authentic miracles and manifestations of God. And then there are those of us who suspect that everything might be happening—insight yes, intuition yes, miracles yes please. However we choose to explain or define these stories of epiphany, what we

cannot do is ignore them. They are the substance of our Christian narrative. They're what move the story along.

Because, when an epiphany happens, what happens next is a fundamental change – a change in someone's life, and very often a change in the world they live in. We're not told what happened in the lives of the wise men after they made that trip to Bethlehem ... but we do know that their story has been remembered for two thousand years as the beginning of the good news about a God whose love reaches out to everyone—Jews and Gentiles, kings and peasants. We're not told what happened to the bride and bridegroom in Cana after Jesus came along and cheered up their wedding reception for them ... but we're left with this story of Jesus beginning his public life, where? at a party; and working his first miracle to bring about what? Joy, abundance, hospitality. We *are* told what happened to Jesus right after his Baptism, right after the heavens opened up and sent him the Spirit and the voice of God; the very next thing Jesus did was make tracks for the wilderness, to catch his breath and try to figure out what that was all about. And yes, to be tempted – anybody who gets identified as God's Chosen is going to be tempted over and over again, tempted to make that Choosing less about God and more about themselves. Jesus prayed through his astonishment, prayed through his temptation, and came out of the wilderness after forty days to start teaching and healing and feeding people in ways that nobody had ever seen before, ways that were all about God and making God's love manifest here and now.

Epiphanies happen. God reveals God's self to us—to our thoughts and intuitions, to our bodily senses in real time. And when epiphanies

happen, fundamental change follows—change in someone’s life, change in the world. This is our story as Christians, the story that belongs to all of us. I hope I won’t freak out you too much if I suggest that it’s your personal story as well. I hope you live with your heart and your mind and your senses wide open to sudden perceptions of essential meaning, wide open to the appearance or manifestation of a Divine Being. I hope you find yourself on a quest to honor an unexpected stranger; I hope you take a big swallow of water one day and find yourself with a mouthful of wine; I hope you hear a brand-new, totally familiar voice in your ears, saying, “You are my child, you are precious to me, you are just who I always wanted.” I hope you see God ... and I hope you let God show you what to do next, how to let your life change, how to be God’s love and be God’s change in the world.

Amen.