WHAT AN EPIPHANY!

January 6, 2019

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

Epiphany is that time in the church year that bridges the gap between Christmas and Lent. Depending upon the date for Easter, the Epiphany season could last anywhere from 4 to 8 weeks. This year, given that Epiphany Day actually is on a Sunday, the Epiphany season is extended for one more week. The Church has chosen green as the color for this season to signify that it is a common season of the church year, even though the Epiphany season usually begins and ends with the two minor festivals on the Sundays when we recognize the Baptism of Jesus and the Transfiguration of Jesus and adorn the chancel with white paraments.

The word Epiphany comes from the Greek word, *epiphino,* which has a variety of meanings such as: to show oneself, to appear, to make visible, to shine, to reveal one’s splendor, or to make known. In other words, the Epiphany season is a time in the church year when we have the opportunity to hear about how Jesus has been manifested in this life and what he has done throughout his ministry to reveal to us the nature and the will of God. Probably one of the best ways to get a handle on what this epiphany of Jesus entails is to take a look at the gospel lessons that have been assigned for this season of the church year.

Beginning with the Epiphany lessons for this church year—that is, the year of Luke—we hear about the baptism of Jesus, Jesus turning water into wine at Cana, Jesus’ proclamation about what he will do by the power of God’s Spirit, Jesus’ call to the disciples to follow him and catch people, Jesus’ healing of all of the people who come to him, Jesus’ pronouncement about who will be blessed in God’s reign, and Jesus’ call for people to love their enemies, judge no one, and forgive others.

For whatever reason, the lessons of this common season often are overshadowed by the festivals of Christmas and Easter. This dynamic is most obvious in the words of the Apostle’s Creed where we move from Jesus being born of the virgin Mary to suffering under Pontius Pilate without any reference to any of the epiphanies that took place during Jesus’ ministry that would reveal his mission in this life as well as our mission if we were to choose to follow him. This omission is not unlike Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” in which the arrest, trial, conviction, execution, and supposed resurrection of Jesus is presented without making any connection with Jesus’ proclamations and revelations that caused the authorities of his day to set out to get rid of him from the very outset of his ministry.

Even before Jesus was out of diapers, he already was a threat to the authorities of his day. News of Jesus’ birth frightened King Herod, so much so that he eventually would slaughter the newborn children of Bethlehem in his attempt to get rid of this child who was reported to be the king of the Jews. According to our assigned gospel lesson for this day of Epiphany, we don’t get the opportunity to hear the whole story about Mary and Joseph’s flight to Egypt, and about the slaughter of the innocent children at Bethlehem.

Whether or not this story is true, the attempt by rulers to pick on children as a threat to their base of power is as relevant today as it was in Jesus’ day. Take for example our current situation in which children who are fleeing with their parents from life-threatening situations in other countries are being prevented from entering our country because they supposedly are a threat to our economy, our way of life, or our national security. If the truth be told, the more that people of color are allowed to enter this country, eventually those who are white and who have attempted to rule this land for the past 500 years will find themselves in the minority. Then what?

As long as the Judaic people remained subservient to Rome, toed the line, and did not disturb the peace, the rulers of Rome would allow them to go about their business as usual. However, this news about a potential ruler who might rise up and rally the people against the Roman authorities was enough of a threat to King Herod for him to take immediate action—an atrocious deed that would result in wailing and loud lamentation, as we are told, throughout all Judea. The current reality of immigrant children being separated from their parents and being warehoused in encampments and various facilities may seem like a more humane way to deal with unwanted children, but the outcome is still the same. Innocent children are the ones who are paying the price for what appears to be a threat to the powers that be.

Some would say that Epiphany Sunday is not a day when we ought to be focusing on the shadow side of our humanity. Isn’t that why our gospel lesson for this festival day ends on such a high note with the wise ones being overwhelmed with joy? They have traveled so far to find this child who supposedly was born king of the Jews, and they have brought with them precious gifts to honor this blessed child. Now that the star that they have been following finally stops over the place where the child and his parents reside, their long-awaited audience with this child would be realized. If I were in their shoes, I would have been overjoyed as well.

However, this joy lasts for only two verses in this particular story before these wise ones are warned in a dream to return home without reporting back to Herod about all that they had seen and learned about this little child. One wonders if they ever received word about what Herod eventually did to all of the newborn babies in and around Bethlehem after their visit, or considered how their inquiry of Herod may even have contributed to this slaughter of these infants. Given the current situation in our own country, perhaps this consideration of silent complicity ought to be ours as well as we receive news and see pictures about all that is being done to immigrant children who evoke an onslaught of fear in our own leaders.

All of this musing brings me back to the essence of Jesus’ epiphany and to the reminder that the Spirit of God as revealed in Jesus dwells in every human being, including every newborn child. Such was one of the emphases of Jesus’ own ministry as he told the people that anyone who welcomes a child in his name actually is welcoming Jesus, and anyone who welcomes Jesus in this way actually is welcoming the one who sent Jesus into this world. Jesus also advocated for children to be legitimate and equal members within the reign of God, and even suggested that we all become as little children as we take part in God’s beloved community.

At this point in this sermon, I am so tempted to run through a whole litany of examples about how children in this country are being neglected, mistreated, abused, and even killed, but you know their plight as well as I. Therefore, I am going to take us in the opposite direction, and invite you into a different world of imagination, as much as this story about wise ones from the East was a story of imagination in the minds of those who wanted to present Jesus as the antithesis to the way that rulers of this world too often lord themselves over other people in order to protect and preserve their own reign of authority and power.

Therefore, imagine with me what would have to change for children in this country in order for you to be overwhelmed with joy on this Epiphany Sunday. From my perspective, the answer to this invitation is pretty simple. No more would ¼ of the children in this country have to go to bed hungry every night. No longer would children be forced to sleep with their parents in their cars at night. No more would children have to be anxious about the water that they drink or the air that they breathe. No longer would children be beaten by their parents just because they are acting their age. No more would child pornography be the lucrative business that it is in this country. No longer would children be born into this world with some malady because their mothers could not afford adequate prenatal care.

The epiphany of Jesus not only sheds light on these travesties in our society, Jesus also reveals to us how we can overcome them. His whole ministry was about revealing, establishing, implementing, and realizing the beloved community that was all a part of God’s design—the God in whom Jesus put his entire trust because the civil and religious authorities of his day could not be trusted to do what was good, right, and just in the sight of God. As we go through this common season of Epiphany this year, I invite you to concentrate on what is good, right, and just in the sight of God for the common good of our society, especially as these attributes pertain to the children of this nation and of all of God’s creation. As we do so, may the love and peace of God that goes beyond all of our human understanding, keep our hearts and our minds ever faithful unto Jesus, the Light of God’s love for all the world to see. Amen.