



Hiding in Plain Sight

*Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given January 8, 2023
The Epiphany; Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12*

Today we are celebrating the Epiphany, which is one of the seven great feasts of the Christian liturgical year right after the twelve days of Christmas. The word Epiphany means revelation or manifestation, and it celebrates the manifestation of God in the person of Jesus the Christ. On this day we tell the story of the magi from the East who followed a star to Jesus in Bethlehem. Although they weren't Jewish themselves, they found the birth of the King of the Jews to be of such profound importance that they left their own homelands to find and honor this manifestation of God in the person of Jesus. But throughout our scriptures and our history there are times that the sacred invisible becomes visible; when people wake up or their eyes are opened to recognize the Holy. This day, the Epiphany reminds us that these revelations of God are not meant to be exclusive to mystics and magi and prophets. Ordinary people like shepherds and teenaged girls and you and I are meant to experience epiphanies as well.

Last week my family and I were lucky enough to vacation in a house on the beach in South Carolina. (We were supposed to be in Costa Rica but that is another story). This was the first time I've ever stayed in a house that was literally right on the beach—you could walk out the back door and onto the sand dunes and to the water. It was magical. One night

after dark we decided to go for a walk at the shoreline and forgot our flashlights, so someone turned on their cell phone flashlight to help us follow the path through the dunes to the water. When we got there, she turned off the light. And after our eyes adjusted, I was shocked to realize how bright it already was. There was no human-made light; the sand dunes covered the few lights on in the houses along the beach. But the night sky was brilliant, full of stars like I've rarely seen before. The moon was only half full, but even so she cast enough light for us to see the features of each other's faces, for us to have shadows. Jupiter was close to the moon, shining so much more brightly than the stars that I almost thought he would cast shadows all on his own. It was plenty bright enough for us to make it back to the house without using the cell phone.

Early this morning while it was still dark the moon was full, and I stepped outside to see how bright she was compared to the half-moon I had just experienced last week, and it was even brighter. Each branch and twig of the trees cast clear shadows in the snow, and I could see everything. Maybe you all already knew this and I'm just waking up to it at age 54, but I was so surprised by how much natural light there is at night. Ironically, human-made light has obscured the natural and beautiful light that is already there all the time, that is hiding in plain sight.

I believe Epiphanies of God are like that. God is hiding in plain sight around us all the time. How do we get to the place where we can truly recognize the presence of Christ and of God in ourselves, in one another, in the stranger and the poor, in the Eucharist, and in the natural world? Of profound importance in daring to hope for our own Epiphanies is the question Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked: who is Christ for us today?

Exactly who and what are we looking for? Could it be that the very light we have been seeing by, the stories of our tradition and the religious practices we have followed, or the distractions and numbing of everyday life, have not always illumined but perhaps sometimes even obscured the natural light of the presence of God everywhere?

We come here to church to encounter God, to be spiritually refreshed and renewed, and that is real. I know from speaking with all of you and from my own life that we often do experience the presence of God here. The scripture and liturgy, the music and sometimes the sermons and the connection with each other can provide that. But perhaps just as often we've often not experienced the light of God at church. There are times when it takes magi from the East, people from outside our tradition following a star of all things to reveal what was right in front of us all the time.

In each of the stories of the season of Epiphany we have clues leading to the presence of God. I think it's no accident that the natural world shows up in all the stories—in the magi following the star, in Jesus being baptized in water and a dove descending on him, in Jesus turning water into wine. This is likely no surprise to us; I know many of us experience profound peace and wonder in the woods and on the water and out in nature. I notice that in today's story the magi say that they "observed Jesus' star at its rising." In Greek the word for "observed" doesn't just mean to see; it means to gaze at, recognize, pay attention to.

And it is the paying attention, and anticipation and expectation of Epiphany, that I think matters. You usually see what you are looking for,

don't you think? And miss the things you aren't paying attention to? What do you typically most notice in any given day? Some of us notice what is wrong. Some of us notice other peoples' emotions. Some of us notice what is beautiful. It's impossible not to notice our own pain. We notice what matters to us and what we are looking for, whether that is good or bad.

And so I return to the question, who is Christ for us today? Let us not ask that question with our minds alone but with our souls and hearts. What are you really looking for? What impact does it have on you when you do encounter what is sacred, the presence of God?

I perceive a great awakening in St. John's and in Western society as a whole. It is everywhere. We are beginning to realize that we are not isolated individuals in competition with one another but are all radically interdependent and connected. The beings of the natural world are sacred and sentient subjects in their own right and not just resources for human use. We are recognizing that no one can be saved until everyone is saved. This may seem preposterous to you, but I believe that Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves ought to extend to pelicans and oyster mushrooms and hermit crabs and even rocks. This awakening happening everywhere is like a line from Alice Walker's beautiful novel *The Color Purple*, when the character Celie has her own Epiphany and realizes that she is profoundly connected with everything—so much so that she says, “if you cut a tree, my arm would bleed.” I see this awakening at St. John's in the form of the Spirit Group who is reading the book *Ladder to the Light* by Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston, who is also a Native American spiritual elder from the Choctaw Nation. I see it

in the men's group exploring nature-based spirituality. I see it in the Justice & Service group seeking to transcend the charity paradigm and instead operate from a more humble reciprocal "walking with" instead of "helping" approach. I see it in the connection between St. John's and Good Courage Farm, the Episcopal agrarian ministry in Hutchinson who call themselves "soil farmers" and who are seeking regenerative practices to restore the earth and feed people sustainably.

Christ, who is also called Emmanuel, God-With-Us, is the person of Jesus, and is also this sacred presence of God inherent in all things. This is why sacredness is the first value of St. John's. To have Epiphanies of this sacredness, it helps to be paying attention. In this new year, my own intention to be looking for the Christ is to integrate Christian wisdom, indigenous wisdom, and my personal experience. I believe with all my heart that the version of Christianity we have inherited, while beautiful and expansive and true in many respects, also has the distortions of empire in it, in the form of colonialism and competition, over-focus on individuals, and in the pain of religion's collaboration with systemic racism and so many other harms. Because of this it sometimes helps to pay attention to wisdom from outside our tradition, like the magi who showed up from the East following a star.

In this New Year, I invite us to a posture of expectation, to encounter the holy in the most ordinary and unexpected of places. See again how beautiful your spouse actually is. See what a joy it is to tend a garden or a child or prepare food for your table. Underneath the surface appearance of your neighbor, notice their innate goodness. Let us also pay attention to what the natural world can teach us about what is good and sacred

and true. Like dolphins who swim constantly coming to the surface and going back under the water, coming up for air again and again, let us continually be dipping our awareness into the sacred throughout the day. Let us listen to wisdom from people like Steven Charleston's book that I again commend to you, *Ladder to the Light*. Let us listen with different ears to the stories of our own tradition, which have clues hiding in plain sight within them, if only we have eyes to see them. I pray that we may all be filled with joy and wonder at the natural light of God, all around and within us, shining in the dark. May this light transform us, connect us with each other, and make everything whole. Amen.