



Contemplation and Action

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

The Feast of the Epiphany (transferred), January 5, 2020

Matthew 2:1-12

Today we are celebrating one of the seven greatest feasts of the church year, which is the Epiphany. Technically the Epiphany happens tomorrow – the conclusion of twelve days of Christmas. On the Epiphany, we celebrate the magi from the East arriving in Bethlehem to greet the Christ child. This feast means many things. The word Epiphany itself means revelation, a light revealing the true nature of things. Jesus is said to be the light that reveals the nature of God and God's love for the world, which always shows up from underneath, from a position of nonviolence and vulnerability and grace. The Epiphany celebrates how Jesus reveals this true nature of God. The Epiphany also celebrates that Jesus is meant to be a light for the whole world, not just for the Jewish people – so that magi from the East arrive to worship him when most of the people of Israel had no idea he existed or who he was. The Epiphany is about illumination, how it is that we see things—especially how it is that we see and recognize God. And this year, what struck me most, looking deeply at this ancient story, is that it was outsiders from the East who first recognized Jesus, using not Jewish history or prophecy or religion, but their own wisdom from their own traditions.

Let's consider the clues that led the magi to Jesus. They were likely Zoroastrians from Persia whose religion led them to study the stars in order to discern important events in the spiritual or religious life of the world. They

came to Jerusalem and inquired of Herod, the ruling authority, about such a momentous event as the birth of the King of the Jews. Through Herod they were told through Jewish scholars that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. They were then led by a star, by the natural world. And finally, they were warned in a dream that Herod was not to be trusted. But whoever it was that they thought Jesus was, their response to him was not intellectual. The gospel says that when they saw the star stop over the place where Jesus was and when they saw him, they were overwhelmed with joy and paid him homage. Their response to him seemed genuinely to be about deep respect and devotion.

In the Epiphany, we are reminded that sometimes, outsiders see our God more clearly than we do. In the Epiphany, we are reminded that it behooves us to be humble and to ask God for the wisdom to perceive things as they actually are, and not assume that we already do. Many of you will be familiar with a Vietnamese Buddhist priest named Thich Nhat Hanh. He became a priest at the age of 16 and during the Vietnam War was active in peace and reconciliation efforts between North and South Vietnam. When North Vietnam took over the country in 1975 he was denied access to Vietnam, and so has been living in exile in the West for most of the time since then. He led efforts to rescue Vietnamese boat people in the Gulf of Siam, and has been a leading voice in the call for interfaith dialogue. He has written more than 100 books. He embodies both a deeply contemplative and a strongly activist life. In 2018, after decades of exile, he was finally allowed to return to Vietnam to his founding monastery, where he now lives in his nineties for the remainder of his life.

Thich Nhat Hanh has written a book called *Living Buddha, Living Christ* in which he explores some of the similarities and differences between Christianity and Buddhism. But it would be an enormous mistake to see that

book as a book about ideas. It is not. Over and over again, he urges people to look deeply at the nature of Jesus—in his words, to “touch” the nature of Jesus, to look deeply at and to touch the nature of all things, so that understanding and compassion can arise in us, so that we ourselves can be healed and transformed to become people of peace that promote peace in this world. He urges us to return to the essence of Jesus’ life, the true nature of Jesus’ teachings. In short, he is offering us an Epiphany about who Jesus is and what Jesus offers us.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that when he first encountered Christianity, it was hard for him to connect with it. Christianity had been so entangled with colonialism in Vietnam, and with discrimination and injustice against non-Christians that he said it was difficult for him to discover the beauty of Jesus’ teachings. But he says this:

Later, through friendships with Christian men and women who truly embody the spirit of understanding and compassion of Jesus, I have been able to touch the depths of Christianity. The moment I met Martin Luther King, Jr., I knew I was in the presence of a holy person. Not just his good work but his very being was a source of great inspiration for me...Through men and women like these, I feel I have been able to touch Jesus Christ and His tradition.¹

For this great and gentle Buddhist monk, the living Jesus, the resurrected Christ, is for Christians the one who leads us into an experience of the interconnectedness of all things, which in Christian terms is expressed as the Trinity. Once we see the true nature of reality, we realize that we are connected with all those we previously considered enemies. In our country,

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ 20th Anniversary Edition* (Berkeley Publishing Group, 1995, 2007) at 5-6.

in this predominantly progressive church, that probably means the people whose beliefs lead them toward hateful actions toward people of color and immigrants. Perhaps everywhere in our country, it might mean people who voted differently from each other in the last election. This is what Thich Nhat Hanh says about enemies—and remember, he is speaking from the perspective of having experienced war in Vietnam:

Our enemy is not the other person, no matter what he or she has done. If we look deeply into ourselves, we can see that their act was a manifestation of our collective consciousness. We are all filled with violence, hatred, and fear, so why blame someone whose upbringing was without love or understanding?

Jesus says:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall become children of God.

And,

Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Do good to those who abuse you.²

In these times, with all that is going on in our individual lives and in the life of the world, it is urgent that we go back to the truth. It is urgent that we let go of all that does not really matter, and have an Epiphany about God in Christ and the compassion, love and understanding that arise not from ideas about God but from seeing and touching God directly. We have so many teachers, all around us. There are quite literally outsiders, wise ones from the East like Thich Nhat Hanh, who have seen and touched Jesus and understood the transformation he offers us, which is the only reason it is worth doing this whole church thing, after all. There are clues in nature, in the heavens, and in our dreams. The whole truth is contained in the present

² Matthew 5:9; Luke 6:27-29.

moment, all of reality exists right here, right now, because we are connected with everyone else through the very fabric of reality, through the God who made us and who sent Jesus to us to heal us and show us how to live.

My own experience is that it takes both contemplation and action to experience any real transformation, in ourselves or in the world around us. We need both silence and courage to act. Let us take time to be silent, to look deeply at ourselves and our families and everything we encounter through the wisdom of mindfulness, through the Holy Spirit, so that we can see what it is God is asking of us, what God wants us to focus on each day. Then, let us experience true compassion—the compassion of Christ—and be willing to risk acting, to promote nonviolence, for the life of the world God so loves. Amen.