

The Sunday of the Epiphany, January 3, 2016. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton      Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Today we come together to mark a special moment. We do so every year at this time. It is, for me, **a moment of wonder and a moment to wonder**. What can this birth - now 2,000 years behind us - mean?

**Epiphany celebrates the revealing to human beings of God, who in Jesus, becomes one of us** – fully, completely, joyously alive as a human being among human beings. As the most recent translation of the Creed says, he “became truly human;” of the genus Homo Sapiens

**Epiphany invites us to take the next step** – in this moment we're to stop and take stock; to look around and ask, 'what's it all about, this thing we call life?' 'What's it all about, in light of Jesus?' For me this is a moment that symbolizes the heights of human possibility available to us **if we walk with God. *This is the dream that calls us on.*** St. Paul spelled it out in writing to his Philippian converts: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.... [and so] I press on...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead; I press on towards the goal, [toward] the prize.....” (Phil 3:10a, 12a, 14b) of knowing, and being in relationship with, God.

If Epiphany reveals this dream then what about the rest of our time - the rest of the year beyond this moment and this celebration? What about all our time, outside of those precious few moments when we get it right? **How should we see *that time in the context of this moment*? How can we live up to the best possibilities of human potential when we live amid some of the worst excesses of human existence?**

That struggle is, I believe, evident through out the history of humanity; it can be seen in the patterns that impose themselves on human beings and human community

Certainly those patterns don't seem to present humanity as living into “the heights of human possibility available to us.” At this time – and at most times – in human culture there doesn't seem like there is or has been a lot of energy around keeping our eyes on the prize that is the fulfilment of God's hope for us, in spite of our professed Christian commitment.

You have to ask “why?” Why do we struggle to live into this hope and vision? I see a lot of reasons presenting themselves, but I see one overarching reason, as I look around me, and as I look back over the expanse of recorded human existence on this planet – all the way up to today – I see that ***human history is full of individuals and communities struggling to emerge from under the oppressive weight of human failing.*** We could be, can be, so much better than we are, but we never quite seem to get there.

The way we as human beings order our lives is, I believe, a part of our failings. The repeating pattern of human failure revolves around how we try to build community, and what happens when we seem to succeed. We move in a cyclical pattern from the birth of a new community in which there's energy, fluidity, purpose, and commitment through a place where we inevitably create structure and lines of authority – institutions – the more easily to order our common life and our individual lives. With that ordering comes an increasingly authoritarian centralization of power and control that's claimed to be about the best interests of everyone, but can all-to-easily become primarily about the preservation of a power position, a narrow ideology, and a dried-up past by the few over the many.

Institutions can – and often do – result in a triumph of control and “order” over the more fluid, deeply-felt expressions of the human spirit that we're privileged to glimpse only occasionally as we journey through time and space, as we journey through our lives and in those moments where we can identify a common life, the life of a community.

I believe that one of the central endeavors of all human community – and especially (for us) all religious community – is to strike a balance between structure and fluidity. The problem is that such a balance is extremely hard to find and maintain - Jesus never quite managed it, nor did St. Paul. And the reality is that the pendulum of human ordering seems always to swing much further and more frequently toward the reactionary, controlling, institutional side than to that other, more fluid, more relational side that more accurately reflects the better angels of our human nature.

But I think that phrase “*seems to*” reflects an important recognition: the pendulum only “*seems to swing much further and more frequently toward the reactionary, controlling, institutional side.*” It doesn’t stay there, and it’s swing is balanced by a shifting toward relationality and community. As I read history, what I see is that every time we advance the human endeavor, every time we take a few steps into becoming a fuller, more wholesome humanity, the forces of control and reaction jump back at us; yet each series of steps forward almost always seems to result in fewer steps back. We have continued, over the span of recorded history, to move forward into an embracing of a more egalitarian, more inclusive, more wholesome human identity.

But its hard, slow work! We’re not there yet; “more” (as in “more egalitarian, more inclusive, more wholesome”) it the operative word for us. Our work, our enterprise, our Christian pilgrimage therefore requires constant vigilance, endless endeavor, and a willingness to celebrate the victories where we can find them while recognizing that there remains much work to be done.

This is the task we have set before us as we enter a year that invites – demands – we work to recover that more fluid, relational, shared vision of community that lies at the heart of all Christian faith. It has been a feature of this community before, and if we don’t want to fade away into the night, we must “make it so” again.

[Last week I mentioned to you] In T.S. Eliot's poem *The Journey of the Magi* it’s clear that **Eliot ‘gets’ the meaning of Epiphany, of birth, of revealing. The Magi ask, you’ll recall, “*Were we led all that way for birth or death?*” The answer is “both”; It’s always “both.”** For the Magi, there’s a sense of alienation from, and a feeling of powerlessness in, a world that has irrevocably changed. **Boy, is that a contemporary feeling?!!** So much of what we think we want and what we think will help us or make us safe has to die; only then is there space for the birth of the Self that God wants, the Self that begins to look like Jesus, that begins to look like the true image of God in humanity.

Today we find ourselves in at the birth of something – someone – quite uniquely remarkable, “the Messiah, Christ the Lord.” This day reminds us that Jesus is both the one we most need and long for, and the one we shall find most strange and troubling.

- It’s here we begin again on the quest for that community both Jesus and Paul spoke of;
- here we hold our breaths and our common breath at the wonder of it all;
- here we’re challenged to ‘let go and let God;’
- here we discover that Jesus will not fit into our world tidily - even when we want him to.
- Here.

And so we are left, on this day, with a vision for the future: our common human struggle continues, the work before us remains, the dream endures. Let us take up that vision, engage that struggle, embrace that dream, in this year that now lies fresh and new before us.

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