

Twelfth Night

As a celebration, Epiphany has faded from view for most of the Euro-American majority culture, which I think is a great shame. For one thing, as I told the children, it has a rich set of Scriptural connections. Epiphany is traditionally the date of the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus with their gifts, a day of great celebration for many of our Latino/Latina brothers and sisters who remember it as *El Dia de los Tres Reyes* or *Tres Reyes Magos*, the Day of the Three Kings or Three Royal Magicians. It is on that day in many Latino cultures that children wake to find presents in exchange for the straw they have left for the Magi's camels. If you think about it, it actually makes more sense to give gifts on Epiphany, when Jesus got gifts, than on Christmas when the Bible records him receiving bupkes. But it's also on Epiphany when, traditionally, Christians have remembered Jesus' baptism by John in the River Jordan as well as his first miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

Epiphany, in case you've forgotten, comes from a Greek word, *επιφανεια*, literally meaning "to shine forth." The word also had the connotations of "to show forth" or "appear," which is the root of its English meaning today. We use the word to mean, "a moment of sudden intuitive understanding; flash of insight." But initially, in Greek and in English, epiphany had to do with the appearance of a god. Some of you may remember the story of one of the Seleucid Emperors of Syria, Antiochus IV, who ruled from 175-164 BCE. He gave himself the title "Epiphanes," which we could translate as "God has appeared," or "God is made manifest." So certain was he that he was a god that he ordered his own statue set up in temples, including the great Temple in Jerusalem, which was under Syrian control at the time. That triggered the Maccabean revolt, the cleansing of the Temple Jews still remember with the holiday of Hanukkah, and a brief independence for Israel.

For Christians, of course, Epiphany refers to the revelation of Jesus as "God's love made visible." That's the rationale for all three of the New Testament stories which are traditionally told today as well as the other lectionary passages normally associated with the Sunday closest to Epiphany. Psalm 72, which we used in our Call to Worship, is relevant for its first verse, translated in this case, "You have given us a king with your own fair judgment, O God, your Son with your own saving justice." The psalm goes on to describe just how different the reign of this king will be from "business as usual." The passage I read a moment ago from Isaiah 60 likewise carries the message that God has been revealed and contains promises of riches from abroad coming to Israel accompanied with camels. This homage by Gentiles to the God of Israel is picked up in Matthew's familiar story of the Magi and is traditionally regarded in the Church as the beginning of the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles. Jesus' baptism is another moment of his unveiling to the world, particularly with the announcement of God's love and the vision of the Holy Spirit's descent. Finally, the story of the wedding at Cana is seen as a preview of God's kingdom on earth – a joyous banquet for all.

With that background, I want to return to the subject of traditional Epiphany celebrations. Since our majority culture takes many of its celebratory traditions from England, it's worth remembering that Epiphany and the night of January 5-6 used to be celebrated with gusto in that country. Prior to the ascendancy of the Puritans in the Church of England in the early 17th century, the twelfth night of Christmas into the morning of Epiphany was a time for full-out parties. These had their roots in scriptural themes, to which I'll turn in a moment, but the Puritans looked down their noses at these celebrations as they did anything frivolous. You may

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not remember that celebrations of Christmas itself were banned during the Puritan Commonwealth in mid-17th century England and in Puritan-dominated New England on this continent as well. Government dominated by religious power is rarely very much fun.

Those old Epiphany festivities in pre-Puritan England generally included a “Lord of Misrule,” who organized the silliness and the feast. Roles were often reversed for the feast, with masters serving servants, men dressing as women and so forth. That reversal of social structure had good theological underpinnings if you think again about how the dawning Kingdom of God under Christ so often reversed human expectations. As Jesus’ mother predicted, God’s Kingdom is a place where God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” And, of course, a party to wrap up the celebration of Jesus’ birth and the coming of the Magi would have been an echo of that wedding party where Jesus made the wine, itself a foreshadowing of the great wedding feast of the kingdom to come. As theatre was reborn in Europe, it became a standard part of the fun on the night that began Epiphany to act out the visit of the Magi, then to produce more elaborate morality plays and, later, secular masques and comedies. All of this fun reached its pinnacle during Tudor and Elizabethan times with the ultimate Epiphany entertainment coming in 1601 with the premiere of William Shakespeare’s play, Twelfth Night.

Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night is, on many levels, the perfect Elizabethan Epiphany play. Before we begin to make thematic connections between the play and the Christian celebration, however, perhaps a synopsis is in order. At the center of the plot is Orsino, Duke of Illyria. He is in love with a noblewoman living nearby, Olivia, but she refuses his suit as she is in a protracted period of mourning for her recently-deceased brother. Into Orsino’s court comes Viola, a young heiress who has been shipwrecked and whose twin brother, Sebastian, she believes has been drowned. To protect herself from unwanted attention, she disguises herself as a boy called Cesario and becomes a page to Orsino. Orsino sends Cesario/Viola to woo Olivia for him and, sure enough, Olivia falls in love with him, I mean her. Meanwhile Cesario (that is, Viola), has fallen in love with Orsino.

While all this is going on, Olivia’s poorer cousin, Sir Toby Belch has moved into her house and, like a typical Lord of Misrule, is partying hard with his pal, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, with the assistance of Olivia’s lady-in-waiting, Maria. Olivia’s steward, Malvolio, is a puritanical sort of fellow and is outraged by the antics of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Olivia’s court fool, Feste. After Malvolio ruins their fun once too often, the partiers plan revenge. Knowing that Malvolio has high aspirations and that he is secretly in love with Lady Olivia, they plant a letter for him to find which looks like it came from Olivia but was actually written by Maria. The letter anonymously declares love for Malvolio and instructs him to act in a very peculiar manner to let the writer know he has read it. Malvolio follows the instructions and Olivia thinks he has gone mad. Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Maria delightedly take the opportunity to imprison Malvolio in a dark shed to begin his “cure.”

Meanwhile, Sebastian, Viola’s twin brother who has not drowned after all, arrives in town. Olivia, who has been throwing herself at Viola-whom-she-thinks-is-Cesario, runs into Sebastian and mistakes him for Cesario. Well of course she does, this is Shakespeare. Olivia begs Sebastian to marry her. Sebastian’s not sure how he got so lucky as to have a beautiful, rich

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heiress propose to him, but he agrees. There is a swarm of scenes of confused identity, a little sword-play, and then the dénouement, in which Viola and Sebastian are reunited, Orsino discovers that his new best friend Cesario is really his new best girl Viola and asks her to marry him, we hear that Sir Toby has rewarded Maria for her help by marrying her and everybody lives happily ever after. Well, everybody that is except Malvolio. Upon being released from his makeshift prison and invited to join the party, he swears revenge on all of them. Well, what did you expect from a character whose name means “Ill will?”

Now, back to the Epiphany themes in the play. There is, of course, the theme of appearance and revelation. Just as God “disguised” God’s glory as a tiny baby, Viola disguises herself as Cesario, Maria disguises her letter as Olivia’s, and Malvolio disguises himself as a bon-vivant. There are other disguises I did not mention in my quick synopsis but all are revealed in joy at the end of the play, just as the baby Jesus was revealed as Christ to the Gentiles in the visit of the Magi, as the Son of God to the Jews at his baptism, and as a miracle worker presaging the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God at Cana. This sense of joy and wonder which is so pervasive in the play was at the very core of the traditional celebration of Epiphany. There was also a strong theme in the Old English Epiphany of truce and reconciliation. In *Twelfth Night*, a number of duels are fought or proposed as the confusion among the characters leads to anger. At the end, almost all are reconciled – Orsino happily becomes Olivia’s brother-in-law rather than her suitor and Viola’s husband instead of Cesario’s rival, and so on. Malvolio is the exception but Shakespeare was an honest playwright who knew full well that there are no completely happy endings in this life. As with the revelation of Christ at his baptism, the action is precipitated by Viola and Sebastian coming up from the water, just as the Magi come to Bethlehem from the East, the siblings come to Illyria from another land, and just as with Christ’s first miracle, the happy action is crowned by marriage and feasting. There are other Epiphany connections in the play but I invite you to read it or watch one of the many filmed adaptations to discover them yourself. I prefer the fine video of 1996 from the BBC, the cast of which includes Helena Bonham Carter, Imogen Stubbs, Imelda Staunton, Richard E. Grant, Nigel Hawthorne, and Ben Kingsley.

But as much fun as it is to review all of this history of religion and of great literature (in my opinion, it’s ALWAYS worthwhile to talk about Shakespeare), what’s the point? What does any of this have to do with being Christians in these early days of the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Nineteen in the ancestral lands of the Coast Salish people? First of all, there are the words of Isaiah, reprinted on the front of our bulletin this morning: “Arise, shine; for your light has come!” It’s really easy to get down at this time of year. The days, while growing incrementally longer, are still too short and too dark. The news all around us seems just a little bleaker following on the heels of a time of near universal celebration, whether Christmas has been a time of spiritual joy or simply of an overabundance of stuff. It’s easy to be gloomy and depressed. But our light has come! We who follow Jesus know that God’s will for good and for love will triumph at last. We are empowered to be a part of that. We are representatives of the King who treats the poor with fairness and brings deliverance to the needy, just as the Psalm says. Our work here together feeds people and gives them homes. We should rejoice in what God has led us to do and what God has for us as the Body of Christ in the future. As the dark looms over our nation and our world, let us arise and shine with the sure and certain knowledge that God’s love will prevail.

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Let us remember, as the baptism of Jesus is remembered, that we, too, are the baptized. As we followed Jesus in that powerful symbol of new life, we also followed him in accepting our identity as God's beloved children. That should also be a source of joy for us and a reminder of our calling to bring that new life into a world that too often enshrines death. Let our joy overflow like the water jars of Cana, so that we can distribute the fine wine of hope and celebration to all of those at our party. Let us look for ways to embody the upside-down world of our Loving Creator, celebrating the little ones, the ones who seem weak in the eyes of the world, the ones that no one pays attention to, just as Mary foresaw, just as the Magi embodied. And let us have the courage to speak God's truth to power wherever and whenever we have the opportunity. The powers of death and darkness do not have the last say. God does.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, called upon those Christians to emulate him in spreading the light and joy and truth of Jesus to all around them: "to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities..." Although the Church need no longer hide in catacombs in our country or fear persecution as it did in Paul's day, we still have the task of proclaiming the mystery which was hidden and now is revealed in Jesus. That calling has not changed. We answer that call as we gather here and proclaim Christ in both word and symbol but there is yet more to do. We must take the word out of this sacred space, out to our neighbors and families and even to strangers. We are preparing to send our brothers, Stephen and Jorge, out into the community on our behalf to bring in our neighbors from other lands, in to our community and in to the family of God. But they are not the only bearers of light in this room today. All of us, in word and deed, are called to arise and shine. The Holy Spirit will empower us to do as God wills. Let us arise for our light has come. Amen.