

# ***The Epiphany We Need***

Acts 10:34-43

I had a bit of an epiphany last week when I arose out of my interminable night of myopic darkness following what I hope will be the crowning optical achievement on my poor eyeballs. The result, by all accounts, was successful: I once was blind, but now I see! What was particularly revelatory to me was how much brighter and clearer the world actually is than what I have come to perceive through my gloomy outlook of the past few years.

For the longest time, I thought it was only the rather ignoble nature of the presidential campaign that cast such a grimy shadow on the landscape of life. For months, nothing seemed clear to me—I lacked vision from the pulpit and could not perceive any truth emerging from the pages of holy writ. I felt confused and uncertain by life going on around me. Everything was a blur. Groping for insight, I languished day and night, degraded to being dragged by dogs through the streets of Noank, never able to look anyone in the eye. For weeks, I was reduced to staring at my living room floor—downcast, moping, and never able to raise my eyes heavenward. Afraid of being left in such a wretched state, I finally fled the emotional imprisonment of the parsonage and drove aimlessly like a Mainiac on the roads of life, unable to sense direction or stop when I should. By November, the darkness overwhelmed me. My days grew shorter; the nights much longer. I became brokenhearted and wasted away in the stygian dusk of anguish, certain of nothing and fearful of all. It was as if torment had become my daily companion and insomnia my bedmate at night. By Advent, even the lilting laughter of little children could not

brighten my outlook. I was deep in the melancholic depths of typhlotic despair.

But then, in the dawn of a new year, the scales miraculously fell from my eyes and now I'm perfectly fine! Quite well, actually! Good to go! Eagle eyes, even. Suddenly, I've become a very enlightened, visionary man. I experienced a true epiphany on Epiphany!

Of course, one person's epiphany is another person's routine medical procedure. Nevertheless, all pedestrian thoughts aside, having a momentous paradigm shift or life-changing insight is basically what an epiphany is. It's an experience that alters your outlook on life, literally and figuratively. A dictionary definition of epiphany is "a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand, or suddenly become conscious of, something that is very important to you." It's an "a-ha!" moment. Epiphanies can be mythical or symbolic, such as found in religious traditions and literature, or they can be legendary, as in the unlikely tale that Sir Isaac Newton discovered gravity when an apple fell on his noggin. More often than not, epiphanies are moments when insights or experiences have a transformative impact upon people—when they begin to grasp something which had never made much sense to them previously. Up until the great Archimedean "Eureka—I've found it!" moment, things had not been clear or evident or meaningful to them.

Originally, the sense of epiphany was that it was an extraordinary encounter with the gods. In the ancient Greek and Latin usage, it referred to an experience where one received divine revelation and insight. For that reason, it's become associated with the story of the visit of the Magi, marking the end of Christmastide and the beginning of Jesus' ministry, i.e., the season of Epiphany—the period of insight and revelation.

In early Christian literature, the word “epiphany” was used in reference to Jesus’ appearance—a revelation of God either at his birth, after his resurrection, or in reference to the Second Coming. It wasn’t until the fourth century that “Epiphany” became associated with the feast day celebrating Jesus’ birth and baptism, recognizing that this was when Jesus and his significance was first revealed to the world. In Matthew’s Gospel, the revelation to the gentile world was symbolized in the Persian Magi who, as some scholars suggest, interpreted the stars and grasped his significance as a world ruler and deliverer born to the Hebrew people in the Syrian-Palestinian region.<sup>1</sup> Coming to see the child in person, the arrival of the Magi foreshadowed the fulfillment of the gospel mission when Jesus Christ would bridge the cultural and religious gulf between Jews and gentiles.

In this light, the birth of Jesus became the divine revelation that altered the religious paradigms and destinies of both audiences. This gets amplified in the Acts passage read earlier where the story of Cornelius results in the epiphany to the Apostle Peter that the God of Israel shows “no partiality” as to divine grace and favor between Jews and non-Jews.

When I noted the lectionary selection for today, I initially thought it was an odd choice for Three Kings Sunday, given that it references a post-Easter experience which took place decades after the events described in the birth stories. Why would the Apostle Peter’s great “A-ha!” moment about God’s embrace of gentiles be tied to the part of the Christmas story about, “We Three Kings of Orient Are”? On the surface, there doesn’t appear to be any relevance whatsoever—nothing is said in Acts about Jesus’ birth, or camel-riding magi, or gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Image, 1979, pg. 173.

However, what links them together, of course, is the notion of epiphany. Matthew's intent in describing Jesus' birth with the arrival of the Magi was to proclaim to his mainly Jewish audience that even pagan astrologers could perceive the significance of Jesus at his birth, while his own people would not. Using a range of symbolic allusions, Matthew portrayed the story of Jesus' birth in a way that tied all of Israel's historic reference points of where God took decisive action to deliver Israel, including the deliverance from the Babylonian exile by a Persian king, along with allusions to the entire Exodus story and Passover, with the flight to Egypt and subsequent return. All of those decisive moments in their story of deliverance as a people were symbolized in various aspects of his telling the birth story of Jesus, whose name meant "he who saves," "he who delivers." Recognizing the cosmic and theological significance of this divine revelation beginning with Jesus' birth would be an epiphany to those who would not otherwise see it.

As rich as Matthew's storytelling is with symbolism and theological meaning, most people probably miss it. It is commonly viewed as merely the story of Jesus' birth and that's it. There are no "a-ha!" moments of great insight, so the Epiphany isn't much of an epiphany.

For that reason, the Acts passage may illustrate more effectively the nature of an epiphany. Prior to our reading for today, the story is basically about Peter's conversion in his outlook on including non-Jews in the emerging church. One day, while he was staying in Joppa with Simon the Tanner, Peter became hungry for something to eat. While it was being prepared, he fell into a trance and had a vision of a large sheet coming down from heaven with all the various critters on earth that Jews were forbidden to eat, at least according to *kashrut*, or kosher, dietary laws. This

religiously disturbing vision occurred three times and each time Peter heard a voice telling him to take and eat, which Peter viscerally rejected and refused to do. It was a devout Jew's nightmare—tantamount to an unforgiveable sin. But again, each time the voice responded: “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.” One might assume Peter was unnerved by all of this, wondering what it meant. And soon it became clear.

Before the day was out, Peter received a summons to come to the house of a Roman centurion living up the coast in the imperial fortress city of Caesarea. On the surface, Cornelius represented much of what was wrong with the world, at least to a Jew in those times: 1) he was a gentile, which, religiously, made him ritually unclean; 2) he was a Roman, which meant he was of the pagan culture dominating their world and corrupting much of what Jews held dear; 3) he was a centurion, which was the imperial military force occupying the entire region, including Judea, with brutal power. In other words, Peter and the early Christians, fearing arrest, normally would have avoided any interaction with someone like Cornelius, simply on the basis of what he represented.

But over the course of this lengthy story in Acts 10, Peter has his reasons to go and meet the person himself and discovers that Cornelius and his family did not fit the stereotype and were actually decent people, respectful of Judaism and its traditions, and devout in their own way toward the God of Israel. Given gracious hospitality, Peter was then startled by their interest in Jesus—what he was about and what he meant. This encounter completely undid Peter's worldview and theology as he realized God was doing a new thing in breaking down the walls of hostility between Jews and gentiles. Jesus was a bridge for reconciliation between

Jews and non-Jews—which, of course, symbolized the entire expansion of the primitive church into other Roman-occupied lands. No longer did the old cultural or religious taboos apply. For the first generation of believers, this was a profound epiphany that radically altered the nature and direction of early Christianity.

What underscores these stories—about the Magi paying homage to Jesus in Matthew and Peter’s radical transformation in Acts—is that both epiphanies—each life-changing divine revelation—occurred when it involved direct human contact between perceived enemies. When each one’s humanity was recognized and respected, the unbreachable barriers between people were broken and the differences seemed less important. The encounter between Peter and Cornelius makes this clear—Peter’s bitter prejudices and religious resistance were challenged by human contact and empathy, and a life-changing transformation resulted. That is the way God works.

This isn’t hard for us to grasp. Humans are naturally tribal; we create false claims of superiority over others through racial pride, religious beliefs, and cultural idioms and customs. Dominant races and cultures write human history placing themselves at the center of value and set all others relative to and distinct from (and certainly less valued than) them. But acknowledging the humanity of others, respecting them as equals, valuing their worth—that’s a game-changer. It usually requires a life-changing epiphany to recognize this.

This is why one of the basic tenets of peacemaking is bringing enemies together face-to-face. Seeing the other clearly, rather than through all the unchallenged distortions of tribal bias, changes everything. We could well pray and insist that our entire country somehow experience an

epiphany to acknowledge that we're all equal and that our cultural wars and partisan politics only perpetuate tribal distortions and falsehoods about each other.

More profoundly, engaging each other's humanity is the way racial or religious hostility is often overcome when people come together to form personal relationships of friendship; in these times, many Christians need to have their own "Peter and Cornelius" moment and recognize the God-given dignity and value of non-Christians, especially Muslims. Likewise, in many households, we still have a way to go to heal relationships estranged and painfully broken over a rejection of another's sexual orientation or gender identity. For thousands of years, the life-giving Spirit of God has been cultivating and inspiring epiphanies within people of all types to help humanity overcome our inherent biases and hostilities.

Frankly, at present these are the types of epiphanies we need in our personal lives, in our society and culture, and throughout our world to overcome our tribal biases. We can only bring true peace to this planet when we figure out how to love our enemies, which is more possible when we meet them face-to-face and see them for who they are and embrace their God-given humanity. This is basic to the Christmas story and to the Gospel message of Christ. It's about God meeting us face-to-face in the person of Jesus, our Emmanuel, to overcome the gulf that separates that which is human from that which is eternal. Love (and all that flows from it) is what is eternal; hatred, on the other hand, is rooted in some form of tribalism.

When we realize this in our heart of hearts, we can acquire new vision for the way life is meant to be. We can see things differently than before; the scales come off and everything becomes clear—life begins to make sense. We can see colors instead of shades of darkness; we can envision the

future with hope, instead of dread it with fear; we will be able to embrace the humanity of others for who they are and see them with our “real eyes”—the real eyes of God that allow us to see and realize life can be good—very, very good for everyone. When we realize this more fully than ever before, then the landscape of life will brighten and we will certainly see the blessings of God and the graces of life everywhere.

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