

Epiphanies

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Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17

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“The mystery of life is not a problem to solve, but a reality to experience.” Jack Kornfield
You can’t buy an epiphany off the rack. They are never “one size fits all.” They are all custom tailored. Your epiphany will not be anyone else’s. I think this is, at least in part, what the Bible means when it says that we are to “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.” There are some things nobody else can do for you.

Certainly, the epiphany of Jesus was his own. Nobody on the banks of the muddy River Jordan that morning experienced what he did. His epiphany didn’t come with the swell of dramatic music like in a Hollywood movie. The text indicates that Jesus saw the Holy Spirit descending as a dove. But it does not say that the crowd did too. And we are left to wonder if anyone else but Jesus heard the voice from heaven. On the other hand, Saul of Tarsus was knocked clean off his horse in an epiphany like a bolt of lightning from out of a pitch-black sky. I imagine that if we’d been traveling with Saul that day, we would all have noticed that something momentous was happening to him. But maybe Saul needed a little more dramatic epiphany to help him to change.

C. S. Lewis’s epiphany started in a long imaginative conversation strolling along with his friend J. R. R. Tolkien on a riverside trail in Oxford called Addison’s Walk by Magdalene College. Lewis’s very conventional life, the quiet life of an Oxford Don, corresponds perfectly with the long, meandering, relatively quiet epiphany he experienced. Contemporary author Mary Kerr’s epiphany, by contrast, was meandering, but hardly quiet and anything but peaceful. It occurred after hitting bottom (and some highway guardrails) as an alcoholic, not once, not twice, but repeatedly cheating death and disaster. The woman who wrote the memoir “The Liar’s Club,” and the poems in “Sinner’s Welcome,” raged against her epiphany like a shark hooked by a fisherman, shaking and struggling ineffectually but viciously until worn out by the exertion.

We all seem to get the epiphanies we need. But there’s one thing all epiphanies have in common.

Epiphanies may occur dramatically or quietly, suddenly or as the climax to a long process, as a consequence of moral struggles, intellectual struggles or emotional struggles, or simply in response to a quiet quest for meaning, but in every case it takes years and years to unwrap our epiphanies, to come to own them fully, to be able to trace out and accept their implications, to say yes with our whole strength to the mysterious reality which our minds and hearts have already affirmed.

It took forty days in the desert for Jesus to really begin to unwrap the implications of his epiphany. I know we aren’t nearly ready for Lent to arrive (we’ve got miles of parades to go

and promises to keep before we get to Ash Wednesday in New Orleans) but in some ways, Lent starts with the words in our Gospel Lesson today: “and straightaway he came up out of the water....” It is at that moment, when the Spirit came upon Jesus, and the Spirit drove him straightway out into the wilderness of temptation, that his own Lenten journey began.

Saul became Paul eventually, but not instantly. It took time for him to grasp the full implications of the epiphany that turned him from a scholarly rabbi teaching among his own faithful people and fighting against the upstart messianic Jewish sect following Jesus of Nazareth to an itinerant preacher telling gentiles (of all people) about the long-expected messiah whom he believed was none other than the same Jesus he had previously opposed.

Epiphanies, like kites on a windy day, trail their tails behind them for yards. And that’s where we come in.

Recently I met an insect exterminator who is struggling with his epiphany. There’s no doubt about the nature of his epiphany, but he’s having a hard time unwrapping it. He came to our house on Saint Simons Island, to do a routine bug inspection, inside and out. I was sitting in our kitchen writing while he inspected. He was going from room to room looking at baseboards and thresholds and windowsills. And as he came through the kitchen, he paused, and he said something about our house sure having a lot of books in it.

I said, “Well, my wife and I were both professors for a long time.”

“Maybe you could answer a question for me then.”

“Uh huh,” I answered, just beginning to really pay attention.

“Who was it said, ‘I think therefore I am’?”

“Rene Descartes, the French philosopher, at the beginning of the Enlightenment.”

“You sure? I thought it was somebody else.”

“No. I’m sure. It was Descartes.” I said, then continued, because it’s hard to break the teaching habit, “But the usual interpretation of his statement isn’t exactly accurate. What he said was that he could doubt everything except that he was doubting. So, really he was saying, ‘I doubt therefore I know the doubter exists.’”

That’s when it was his turn to say, “uh huh.”

And from there the bug man and I moved into a wide-ranging conversation that led eventually to his telling me that he knew for a fact that God had laid his hand upon him and intended him to become a preacher, but he just couldn’t bring himself to do it. He felt sure that God wasn’t likely to let up on him. But he lacked the courage to follow through. He sort of argued with himself for awhile, in my presence.

Finally I said, “you know, hooked fish splash around the most.” He was from the Pentecostal-Holiness tradition so I suspected he’d get the point.

The thing is, most of the time when we talk about epiphanies, we end up doing what I just did, talking about conversions or calls to professional ministry. But that's really a mistake. When we do that we tend to limit the whole point of the story of Jesus' baptism and his epiphany.

When we strip away all the special effects from the moment of Jesus' baptism, and we just listen to the biblical text itself, we find a man who submitted himself to what was (at that point in time) a simple symbolic washing by an eccentric Jewish prophet, John. We find in Jesus a person who experienced a profound sense of the presence of God as Holy Spirit, a person who heard either out loud or deep within his heart a voice from heaven blessing him and reminding him to whom he belonged. And then he went forth into the desert where he learned through a trial of temptations that survival and self-preservation, self-aggrandizement and power over others were not the way to become the sort of human beings God created us and calls us to be.

On the outside, Jesus got a muddy bath. On the inside, he knew himself to be blessed and claimed at the same time.

Epiphanies lead us to see the challenges of human existence from a completely new perspective, from the perspective of the insights gained in the epiphany itself. Epiphanies lead to wildernesses where we figure out the "therefores" of God's touch.

"You are my beloved. I am well pleased with you." Epiphany!

"You belong to me. You are bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." Epiphany!

"You are mine. *Therefore* live in such a way that others can tell by the look in your eyes to whom you belong."

Ah... *Therefore*....

Several years ago, while I was teaching a summer semester at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, I was invited to preach in a congregation of the United Church of Canada. I can't remember what I preached about, but I do recall their beautiful Confession which was adopted in 1968.

"We are not alone,
We live in God's world.

"We believe in God:
Who has created and is creating,
Who has come in Jesus,
The Word Made Flesh,
To reconcile and to renew,
Who works in us and others,
By the Spirit."

Such simple, comforting words: "We belong to God." But this affirmation is never complete until we also say: "Who works in us and others by the Spirit."

The late Fred Craddock, one of the finest preachers and greatest professors of preaching of all time, once told the story about a new pastor arriving in a little town. It so happened that a small boy attended the church where the pastor had come. The boy came all alone, on his own. No one else in the family came to church.

This little guy, it was widely known in the community, was of uncertain paternity. Everyone knew his mother, but no one knew who his father was, and being good Southern Christian folks, the church members only talked about it in hushed tones preceded with the twisted blessing we all know, "Bless his heart, that poor child doesn't know who his daddy is."

So it happened that gasps went up all around at the front door of the church the new preacher's first Sunday, when the little fellow approached the preacher, and the preacher, smiling, said cheerfully, "You know who your daddy is, boy?"

The boy was struck mute by the words. "You know, boy? You know who your daddy is? Hold on, now. Let me take a good look at you and I'll tell you who! Your daddy is the Lord God, the King of Heaven and Earth. I can tell, because he's my daddy too. I can see the family resemblance in your eyes."

You belong. You're mine, says the Lord. You're not alone in this thing. That muddy water dripping down the face of Jesus is an emblem, a memorial everlasting. And it is dripping down your face too. Remember your baptism. You belong. Now, let's figure out what that means and do it.