

Have you had an epiphany yet?

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

1st Sunday after the Epiphany: the Baptism of the Lord. January 7, 2007. (Text: Luke 3:15-16, 21-22)

Have you ever had an epiphany? I bet you have. An epiphany is what we call it when – all of a sudden – we understand something we never understood before. An epiphany is a *revelation*; and all of us have them. When you have an epiphany, it's like the clouds lifting, suddenly allowing you to see the glory of the snow-capped peaks as you drive up from Denver on a winter day. What was formerly hazy and hard to comprehend abruptly becomes crystal clear.

Some people who adopted a family for the Holiday Baskets program two years ago had an epiphany when they went shopping for their family. They bought clothes and Christmas gifts for an immigrant family of five: a dad, a mom, and three kids. They spent a little more money than they'd expected they would, but it was hard to stop because they were having such a good time. Suddenly it registered on them: *giving is more fun than getting!* That was their epiphany. Of course they knew that Jesus had said, "It's better to give than to receive." But they had always thought he just meant that it was "better for you" (something in the same vein as "It's better to eat spinach than it is to eat coconut cream pie"). But maybe Jesus meant exactly what they were feeling, that is: it's *more fun* to give than it is to get. More pleasant. —I wish everybody would have that epiphany (especially at stewardship season)!

The Feast of the Epiphany was yesterday, and we're in the season of Epiphany for the next seven weeks. Christianity is a religion of epiphany, a religion of *revelation*. When I say that, I mean quite simply that we can only know God (or things about God, or God's will for us) to the extent that God chooses to reveal "Godself" to us. In that respect, God is totally unlike you and me. For example, I might not know much about you – maybe nothing at all. But once I learn your name, I can do little quick internet research on Google and find out all kinds of things about you, whether you want me to know them or not! If I'm a detective or a spy I will have access to additional tools to help me conduct the kind of investigation that will uncover more data about you than I could ever find just using Google. I might even learn your deepest secrets. —Well, we can't do that with God. We can only know as much about God as God has chosen to *reveal* about himself. Christianity is a religion of epiphany.

When Joan and I first went out to Thailand to be interviewed for the opening for a priest and deacon at Christ Church in Bangkok, it was the first time we had ever been to Southeast Asia. We didn't really know whether we wanted to work there or not. A missionary friend had asked me if he could give that church my name, and – without thinking too much about it – I had said, "Oh, sure. Why not?" But once we were there, and the possibility of being called to serve overseas had become real, we were unsure ...unclear. We paid a visit to the Bishop of Singapore (who was in charge of the Anglican work in Thailand). He was a deeply spiritual Chinese gentleman —a man who had earned his livelihood as a medical doctor until he became a bishop. His name was Moses (a very good name for someone to whom we were looking for guidance). I asked him, "Bishop Moses, how will we know whether it's God's will for the two of us to leave Colorado and go to serve in Bangkok? How will we know?"

He answered in a very calm, matter of fact way. He said, "Pray for a revelation."

"Oh, sure," I thought to myself. "Why didn't I think of that? Just 'Pray for a revelation'!" I was a little skeptical; but we had come half-way around the world on the off-chance that this might be what God wanted us to do. And we needed to know for sure. So Joan and I agreed to pray for a revelation.

On our next-to-last day in Bangkok, we attended a service in the church for the Thai-speaking congregation. Of course, we couldn't understand anything, but a nice Canadian woman who was married

to a Thai man sat right behind us and quietly translated everything into English. During the service, the lay minister who was leading said – to the whole congregation of course, not just to us – “*Jesus says, ‘I gave my life on the cross for you. What have you ever given up for me?’*” At that moment, Joan and I turned simultaneously to one another, both of us with tears streaming down our cheeks, and we both said at the same time: “That’s our revelation!” It was an epiphany. The fog of uncertainty had cleared away in a heartbeat, and we could see exactly what God wanted us to do. He wanted us to come to Bangkok.

I believe that when Jesus was baptized *he* had an epiphany! At least that’s how I understand the four gospels. You see, Jesus was the Son of God, but he was also a human being exactly like us. And, just like us, he had to ask himself the question, “What’s my life all about? What does God want me to do?” Sure, his mother and Joseph had probably told him about the events which we now call “the Christmas story.” But even if he knew the story by heart, it didn’t answer his question. He might have thought, “O.K. I’m God’s Son. I believe that’s who I am. —But what am I supposed to *do*?”

His cousin, John the Baptist, was the best known religious leader in all of Galilee and Judea. —It’s easy for us to forget that.— There hadn’t been a prophet in Israel for four hundred years, ‘til John the son of Zechariah burst on the scene. He drew huge crowds. He was immensely popular. Everybody knew who he was – from the High Priest right on down to the humblest, poorest herdsman. Nobody knew who Jesus was, in those days, except his neighbors in Nazareth; and they just knew he was a carpenter.

Jesus went and spent time with his cousin John. He followed him around. He listened to him preach. He prayed and waited for an answer ...waited for a revelation. One day, as John was preaching to the crowds and people were going down into the water, confessing their sins, getting baptized, and committing to live a new life, I think Jesus was deeply moved. He felt tremendous love for these people. They truly were like “sheep without a shepherd.” But they wanted to please God! At that point, I think, Jesus suddenly had a revelation, an epiphany. He knew what God wanted him to do. God wanted him to identify himself with his people —with *God’s* people. His Father had sent him to take the sins of his people upon himself, set them free, and lead them into a new place of intimacy with God. —So he plunged into the water! In a sense, as the people were going into the water to have their sins washed away, Jesus went into the water to take their sins on himself.

When this happened, there was another epiphany: a dove, a symbol of the Spirit of God, flew down and rested on him. And a Voice spoke to him from heaven, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” It was his heavenly Father saying, “Yes, yes! You have it right. You understand who you are. You understand what I want you to do. —I am so happy with you!”

Do *you* understand who *you* are? Do you understand what God wants you to do with your life? Have you had an epiphany yet? ...a moment when suddenly you understand what you never understood before? If you haven’t, I recommend that you pray and ask God for one. Ask for a revelation. Ask, and keep on asking! You are God’s child, and he loves you. I’m quite sure that there’s more meaning to your life than just having a job, raising a family, making some money, and retiring. If you haven’t had an epiphany yet, get ready for one. God isn’t finished with you yet!

I want to end by saying that I also believe God has more for *us*, too, as a church. I invite you to join me on this first Sunday of the new year in praying that God would give Christ Church a revelation, an epiphany of his special purpose and will for our partnership in his work. And I pray that we might be as committed to that revelation as Jesus was when he took the plunge into the Jordan that day so long ago. God grant that one day we might together hear him speaking to *us*, saying “*You are my beloved children. I am so pleased with you!*”