



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Waiting for an Epiphany” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)
January 5, 2020; Second Sunday of Christmas (Eve of the Epiphany)

Readings: Excerpt from “It’s Amazing What You’ll Discover through New Eyes” by Dennis Merritt-Jones
(www.huffpost.com/entry/gaining-a-fresh-perspective_b_3614757);
a retelling of Matthew 2:1-12, Matthew 3:13-17 and John 2:1-12.

What’s an epiphany?

(Await answers.)

As you say, it is an “aha” moment. The feast with a focus on magi coming to see the newborn Jesus is named for getting insight, seeing things differently, as suggested by our first reading. Based on the next reading that was three stories told together, Epiphany is more than magi but historically includes Jesus’ baptism as well as his first miracle. Even though celebrating all three “aha” moments is the oldest tradition, Western Christians are not the only ones who narrow it down. Orthodox churches focus on Jesus’ baptism, an emphasis popularized in Alexandria where the Nile flooded its banks at about this time, making possible agriculture in an otherwise arid place. It feels right to highlight a story with water as a blessing.

These stories are embodied in traditions in East and West. For example, in the East a priest will bless bodies of water by throwing a cross into it. People jump in even freezing water to fetch it. In Russia they cut a hole in the ice to take a dip in the blessed water. In the West the day is often marked with the year chalked on doorframes with initials for the traditional names of the magi, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. The day launches a season of parties, like in New Orleans. This is the Three King Cake tradition with the person who finds a figurine of Baby Jesus crowned as Queen or King until Lent. We’re having a version of the King Cake today for our party.

I’m struck by how the traditions connect the divine with experience. Alexandrians underscored the importance of the Nile, but honouring magi made sense in terms of European history. First there’s the cosmopolitan nature of the Roman empire, especially Rome with people from across the empire living there. Then the empire fell in part when new tribes came to Western Europe. To bring unity to a diverse population it made sense to highlight Jesus’ coming for all nations. In both traditions, the connection between the divine and our experience moves beyond Jesus. It embraces all of us, and the world. Jesus’ identity wasn’t just revealed when magi followed a star to see him, or he was named beloved during his baptism, or when a wedding feast was saved from disaster. He was discovered in the star itself. He was revealed in the river. He was made known in jars full of wine. The divine is all around us and we catch glimpses of this in our lives.

With this in mind, I invite you now to think of a time when you experienced G-d's presence, when you felt a sense of the divine, when a moment seemed particularly profound.

(Pause)

Now turn to a neighbour and share what you thought about.

(People have brief conversations.)

So, what are some of the things you talked about?

(People share some insights.)

What links these experiences together is how they happen in the world and yet are not just of it. What I mean is we get a glimpse, if only for a moment, that there's more to the world than what we normally experience, a wonder, a shining within it. And at least for a time we see the world, others, ourselves, differently. These aren't experiences that are divorced from the world, as if we need to be raptured from it, even if some people of faith, including presidential advisers think so.

Rather, the world is a holy gift, and we're saved by our connection to it. We celebrate this in traditions like chalking doorframes and taking dips in freezing cold water. And we nurture our openness to G-d's presence around us when we slow down, take time to contemplate, spend time in nature, meditate with music or poetry, write, spend uninterrupted time with family and friends.

This is important because otherwise we forget that everything is a holy gift as we get caught up in our lives once more. That insight is the prime message of Christmas, a celebration not just of Jesus' birth but the meaning of incarnation. I've said this before. We often limit incarnation to Jesus but the experience of G-d in and through him points to divine presence in and through all things, us included. G-d comes in the life of this one person to reveal how close G-d's always been no matter how much we try to make G-d distant. The three epiphany stories extend what this means. Jesus' baptism and his being declared G-d's beloved names how G-d is pleased with him, and in him, with all of us. We can let go of our need to make ourselves loved and celebrate that we already are. This is the teaching at Cana as water for purification is changed to wine for communion where we enact that we are a beloved community. And no one is excluded, a prime meaning of the magi visiting Bethlehem, no matter how much we may act otherwise. The fact natural elements are such a part of these stories remind us this beloved belonging includes all of creation, something we need to keep naming as wildfires in Australia underscore so profoundly.

That is what Epiphany, and all of Christmas celebrates. As we give thanks for the insight all three "aha" stories offer, may we celebrate what it means to be beloved of G-d in relationship with all other beloveds of G-d, human and other than human. May we take time to nurture this awareness, and approaching each day prayerfully, may we be ready for epiphanies that await us. Amen.