

Epiphany of the Lord

Isaiah 60:1-6 - “Arise, shine” in verse 1 means, “Stand up and let us see you in all your radiant glory.” Isaiah has a vision of hope that indicates the long night of suffering will soon be over for Jerusalem, and a new day would soon dawn... a day when she will rise from the dust where she has lain for so long. Radiance will replace ruin, joy will displace sorrow, and abundance will overcome poverty.

Ephesians 3:1-12 - Paul’s ministry was unique. As a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul served as an apostle to the Gentiles. He consistently sought to reveal the mystery of God’s intention to bond Jew and Gentile together as one believing community... one body of Christ (vv. 1-7). He is quick to recognize he does not deserve this commission, but he rejoices in it because God chose him to reveal the wonder of God’s eternal plan.

Matthew 2:1-12 - It is uncertain whether the star was a supernova, a comet, a conjunction of planets, or a totally supernatural apparition, as may be implied in 2:9. However, it is clear the magi (wise men) and Matthew recognize it as the fulfillment of Numbers 24:17.

The magi were seeking the King; Herod was opposing the King; and the Jewish priests were ignoring the King. These Jewish priests knew the Scriptures and pointed others to the Savior, *but they would not go to worship Him themselves!* They quoted Micah 5:2 but did not obey it. They were *five miles* from the very Son of God, yet they did not go to see Him!

Do You See What I See?

Epiphany means to “reveal” or “to make known.” It might well be known as the “do you see what I see” season. A young girl living in poverty and raising a baby greeted wise men seeking a King. No doubt, this didn’t fit with their expectations. But their hearts were seeking and eager to find God so they put aside their preconceived ideas and worshiped anyway.

Jewish priests knew scripture. They knew the fulfillment of the text. But their hearts were not looking for God. They were seeking position and stature. There was no room for worship and they missed the King.

What are you seeking? Are you ready to see God in unexpected places and circumstances? He’s there, waiting to reveal Himself. Go ahead – follow the wise men. Put aside your preconceived ideas. Bow down. Worship.

Prayer:

Almighty God, who led the wise men by a shining star; lead me now by faith, revealing Your presence and glory in my life. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B

Baptism of the Lord

Genesis 1:1-5 - Light was God's answer to the dominance of darkness. It was the Lord's first positive move toward completing the full program of creation. Without it, the other steps would have been meaningless. The creation of light ended the reign of darkness and brought on the first day. When the Creator looked upon the product of his will, he found it perfectly complete and admirable; and he was pleased. The Apostle John reminds us: "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5).

Acts 19:1-7 - When Paul arrived in Ephesus he met twelve men who had become disciples of John the Baptist. They had been baptized by John and knew his message of the coming Messiah but did not know Jesus was the Messiah. And, they knew nothing about the Holy Spirit. Paul's teaching assures them that Jesus is the fulfillment of John's teaching, and they are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul lays his hands on them and they receive an outward demonstration of the gift of the Holy Spirit, which confirmed God had accepted them.

Mark 1:4-11 - Whenever notable people were to come to a city, roads were repaired so their journey would be easier. The people of Israel were at that time in a "spiritual wilderness," and John had to get them ready for the arrival of the Son of God, the Servant (Luke 1:13-17, 67-79). He wanted to lead them out of their spiritual bondage in a "second exodus" that would bring them salvation. John's ministry was effective and the people responded enthusiastically.

Jesus was not baptized because He was a repentant sinner, since He is the sinless Son of God. His baptism in water was a picture of His baptism of suffering on the cross (Luke 12:50) when the "waves and billows" of God's judgment went over Him (Ps. 42:7; Jonah 2:3). He "fulfilled all righteousness" through His death, burial, and resurrection (Matt. 3:15). The voice of the Father and the presence of the Spirit as a dove both acknowledged the deity of the Servant.

Gimme A Sign!

Epiphany means to "reveal" or "to make known." Throughout church history, Epiphany has celebrated the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, symbolized by the revelation to the three Wise Men. Epiphany is closely connected to the baptism of Jesus and the miracle at Cana, when Jesus turned water into wine. Traditionally, Epiphany has been a day of baptism and also a day when houses were blessed, a visible sign of a renewed commitment to serve and honor God.

So what's the big deal? In our modern day and age, why Epiphany?

Like Christians of old, we still need a sign. We need God to use the visible to reveal the invisible. In the waters of baptism, our spiritual rebirth becomes tangible. In the blessing of our homes, we visibly renew our commitment to welcome Christ into our homes on a daily basis. In the signs and sacraments of faith, God illuminates His presence and power, driving away the darkness and allowing us to see His Kingdom at work in our lives.

Prayer:

Almighty God, who revealed Christ to the Wise Men and His deity on the day of His baptism, reveal to me Your presence and glory in my life. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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Second Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20) - Samuel had been dedicated to the Levitical ministry at Shiloh and had undergone training in the things of the LORD. However, he had not yet been addressed by the direct revelation of God (v 7). The time came for the LORD to fulfill His promise to remove Eli's priesthood and establish another, so the divine silence was broken. While Samuel was reclining in the tabernacle attending to the burning lamp, he hears the voice of the LORD but mistakenly takes it to be that of Eli. Finally Eli discerns that the boy is being addressed by the LORD and advises him to submit himself to whatever the LORD would have him do.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 - Sometimes, general statements need qualification. In Corinth, the words, "Everything is permissible for me..." had apparently become a slogan to cloak the immorality of some in Corinth. Although the statement is true, it required qualification. Paul qualifies the wonderful freedom we have by cloaking it with the principle of love toward self and neighbor.

Liberty that is not beneficial, but detrimental to someone else, is not loving (1 Cor. 8:1; 10:23) and is to be avoided. Although everything may be permissible, it may not always be for our best interest. When liberty brings slavery... it violates love of self and others.

John 1:43-51 - Philip's testimony to Nathanael stressed that Jesus is the Promised One of whom Moses (Deut. 18:18-19;) and the prophets (Isa. 52:13-53:12; Dan. 7:13; Micah 5:2; Zech. 9:9) wrote. Surprisingly Philip called Jesus ... the son of Joseph. But this is what the disciples would have believed at this time. Yet Nathanael would soon recognize that He is "the Son of God" (John 1:49).

Ouch, That Hurts!

Oh, that God's Epiphany in our lives would resemble our Nativity displays – a cute baby, adoring mother, and worshiping Magi – something to smile at as we hurry on with our day-to-day lives. But God's revelation can sometimes stop us in our tracks, confronting us with our need to radically change how we live our lives. Sometimes, it's a painful illumination.

Today's readings show us exactly this. God's call to Samuel brings about a choice between his love for Eli and his love for God. Paul's words to the church in Corinth pit their physical desires against their spiritual desire to follow God. And the words of both Philip and Jesus force Nathanael to confront his doubts about Jesus and the direction for his future.

To truly experience the power of Epiphany, we must open ourselves up to see God as He reveals Himself – not as we wish Him to be. But the revelation of Christ in our lives will always result in our greater transfiguration to more fully reflect Him.

Prayer:

Almighty God, help me to hear Your Word and embrace Your calling so I may reflect You; and in so doing, cause others to know and worship You. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 - Chapter 3 represents Jonah's 'ground-hog day'—a chance at a re-run of that monumentally significant day when he began the long defiant walk from his home, headed for the port of Joppa (1:3). Now God speaks again. This time, the citizens of Nineveh believe God and repent.

Jonah was not the first servant of the Lord to have been given another chance. He will not be the last. Although God is unchangeable in character, He may change His conduct toward men as they change their attitude toward Him. Repentance in man is a change of will. Repentance in God is God willing a change.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 - The secular view of the indestructibility and the unchanging future of the world was the subject of first-century discussion. For the Christian the concept of time (*kairos*), had changed radically. Life now took a new perspective, so marriage, grief, and making money must not be all consuming. These all looked different with the new Christian clock, for the world in its present form was passing away, it was not indestructible. Within this theological framework, Paul expresses his concern that those who raise the issue should be free from life's burdens in the present distress.

Mark 1:14-20 - Jesus begins His ministry following John's arrest. The prophets had anticipated the "fulfilled time" as the era when God's rule would become a reality. The necessary response to God's work in Jesus was repentance (a change in life direction) and trusting in the good news of God's reign.

Jesus' call to the first disciples included a demand: "Follow me," and a promise, "I will make you fish for people". In the Old Testament fishers caught persons for God's judgment (Jer 16:16-18). Here persons are caught for salvation. The immediate response of leaving nets and father illustrates the sacrificial commitment of those first disciples.

Here's Your Chance

We've all said it: *Just give me a second chance!* At the heart of that request is the acknowledgement that our priorities were out of order. Today's readings remind us that priorities – and choices – are important.

Paul's words to the Corinthians set perspective on the temporal and the eternal. And in the Gospel reading, we see why those words remain important to us today. When Jesus calls, we are presented with a choice – maintain the status quo or discover a new way of thinking and living. Unless our priorities are clear, we can miss the call and the choice. Simon, Andrew, James, and John knew their priorities. Because of this, they were ready when Jesus called.

He's still calling. Here's your chance. Will you follow?

Prayer:

Gracious God, establish Your will in me and open my ears to hear Your voice, proclaiming the glory of Your salvation to others. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 - Moses said that God would bring the nation a greater Prophet (18:15), that is, Jesus Christ (Acts 3:19–26). Every prophet that arose after Moses would share in an aspect of the hope for this greater Prophet. The word “prophet” (Deut. 18:15) means one who speaks for another (Exod. 7:1–2). The biblical prophet was one who spoke forth a message for God (Deut. 18:18; cf. Jer. 1:4–7).

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 - Most meat that was available in the marketplace came from animals sacrificed in the temple. To the more scrupulous in the community all of this meat would be suspect. However, some Corinthians felt more mature because they were convinced that idols had no reality—“for there is but one God.” Therefore any food offered to idols was still fit to eat.

Paul stresses that “love,” not knowledge, is the key to Christian conduct. It would be better not to eat meat, even if one’s conscience allows, than to lead a fellow believer into sin.

Mark 1:21-28 - The town of Capernaum becomes the base for Jesus’ operations. Here Jesus displays his authority, which astonishes those who encounter it, and which calls forth an immediate response. The bystanders recognize his authoritative teaching. So does the man possessed. If the crowds recognize the authority of Jesus, the supernatural world knows who he really is—the ‘Holy One of God’ (v. 24). Jesus must do battle with the forces of evil. This episode in the synagogue contains all the elements of struggle that Jesus will encounter as he makes God’s presence real among his people.

Here Is Your God

What does God look like? It’s an age-old question. Today’s readings give us a glimpse of God that causes us to look again – at God and at ourselves.

Moses’ words offer hope of a Prophet who does not strike fear into the hearts of men. His words speak of One whose voice offers reconciliation. In Paul’s words, we hear love trumping law. No matter how “lawful” our actions, they must still meet the needs of others if they are to meet with God’s approval. And in the words and actions of Jesus, we see restoration. Evil is cast out and man is made right with God.

Reconciliation. Love. Restoration. This is what is seen when God is revealed. It’s a reflection our world longs to witness.

Prayer:

Loving God, reveal to me Your mercy so I, in turn, may reflect Your loving mercy to a world in need. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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The Presentation of the Lord

Malachi 3:1-4 - The Old Testament reading comes to us from an “in-between” place. God’s people have been brought back from exile and are anticipating God’s presence with them, but they haven’t experienced it as of yet. In the past, the Temple was where God lived, and his presence was always with them. Because of the exile, they knew that God wasn’t with them in the same way he was in the past. Something new was needed. Malachi prophesies that the new thing is coming. “... See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight— indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

Little did they know it would be a four-hundred-year wait. Malachi marks the beginning of a long pause in God’s voice that lasts until the Gospels burst forth on the scene with Christ’s annunciation.

We, like Malachi and his hearers, are in an “in-between” place. The place of promised return and the here-and-now.

Hebrews 2:14-18 - Jesus is truly unique. He is human and can relate to all of us. He is God and can operate on our behalf in ways we simply can’t. He is greater than angels yet willing to submit himself to human life. Because of his Holy Spirit, we can live the life he has called us to live. The Holy Spirit transforms us into something we could never be without him. He is the Center for Christians in every way. He is in, above, below, around, beside and outside of our lives and experiences. Because he is all these things and because he has lived as one of us, we can trust him. We can trust him to be a merciful priest to make an all-sufficient offering on our behalf.

Luke 2:22-40 - Mary and Joseph were good Jews. They knew the Law and lived it out in their relationship.

Presenting their son would have been a duty, honor, and privilege. Given the bizarre circumstances of his conception and birth, bringing him to the Temple must have felt like a convergence of sorts.

Angels, the Holy Spirit, dreams and threatening kingdoms are all methods God had used in the past. Now, it was happening again to this young couple and this baby. Entering the epicenter of God’s presence (the Temple), God confirms he is once again up to something miraculous. Simeon, who is righteous and devout says, “*Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*” Further, Anna the prophetess praises God because of Jesus.

All of these actions in the Temple lead Luke’s readers to understand that God has heard the cries of his people, as before in Egypt. He is at work bringing salvation and liberation. There is no holier place in Israel than the Temple. It is where God resides and where Jesus is recognized as the long-awaited hope of Israel.

A Living Gospel

Can we trust God? Will God do what he says? Will he do what he has done in the past? Does he hear our cries for help? These are questions on the minds of many Christians. Our lives seem to be caught in the in-between time of Malachi, while we hope and wait for God to do something. Perhaps we want a change of circumstance, or for him to show his grace and mercy. Whatever it may be, we place our hope upon his shoulders, and we wait. Simeon had been waiting for some time. God promised he wouldn’t die until he saw God’s salvation. He was waiting, trusting, watching, hoping.

When we read these stories, it is easy for us to feel as if it was good for them but “What about me?”

If it is true that God doesn’t change (it is) and he is good (he is), then we too can have hope in Christ. God will act with mercy in the way he has done in the past. He will deal graciously with you and me because he identifies with us. All we have to do is wait and trust in his faithfulness, and we will see the salvation of the Lord.

Prayer:

Strong and mighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus, the presentation of your Son in the temple was his first entrance into the place of sacrifice. Grant that, trusting in his offering upon the cross to forgive our sins and uphold us in the time of trial, we may sing your praises and live in the light of your salvation, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 40:21-31 - Unlike pagan idols, God who created everything is eternal. He never grows weary. He gives strength to those who are weary or weak (vv. 29-31). Among Isaiah's original readers, those who hoped in the LORD were believers who remained faithful to God. They were the ones who would be restored. For his readers in captivity, Isaiah was probably speaking of a national refreshing when the captives would be released and would return to their land. Even though in captivity they were weary the LORD would help them endure and soar ... like eagles, to be uplifted emotionally and spiritually.

1 Corinthians 9:16-23 - Although Paul had the authority (right) to receive material support, he balanced his authority with discipline. He did not have the right to give up his liberty in Christ, but he did have the liberty to give up his rights. This helps us understand why he wrote as he did: he gave the Corinthian believers a living example of the very principles he was writing about.

Should not the stronger believers in the church be able to set aside their rights for the sake of the weaker saints? Was eating meat more important than edifying the church? Paul was talking about *priorities*, the things that are really important to us in our lives. It is unfortunate that some Christians have their personal priorities confused and, as a result, are hindering the work of Christ.

Mark 1:29-39 - Peter's house became a place of healing for the whole city! How important it is for us to "take Jesus home with us" after we have worshiped. The Lord met the need in the home and then used the home to meet the needs of others. The crowds did not come until the Sabbath had ended because religious tradition said that healing was work that must not be done on the Sabbath. But Jesus had deliberately broken that tradition already (1:21-28) and would do it again (3:1-5; John 5; John 9). Mark made a distinction between those who were diseased and those who were demon-possessed (1:32). While some physical affliction may be caused by demons (Luke 13:10-17), not every disease is demonic in origin.

There's No Place Like Hope!

For centuries, Epiphany has traditionally been a time of house blessings. Each year, the head of the household would take holy water from the church and sprinkle it on the doorway while the entire family prayed. This annual dedication of the home was a visible reminder to welcome Christ into the heart of daily life.

Today's readings show us the importance of this principle. Paul's words to the church in Corinth get into the nitty-gritty of life. His admonitions weren't about "pie in the sky" religion – they hit the everyday issues of priorities and how we treat people. Are we going to be right or will we choose to be reconciled with our brother and sister?

Jesus' lodging at the home of Simon and Andrew demonstrates his active involvement in the everyday lives of his followers. A mom was sick, in need of healing. Jesus met her at the point of her need so that the rhythm and routine of the home could continue and become a blessing to the entire community.

In our homes, faith meets function. When Jesus is welcomed to live with us, our homes become places of hope – for us and for those whose lives are closely linked with ours.

Prayer:

Merciful God, create in me a heart that welcomes You into everyday spaces, making Your abundant life known to those around me. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B*

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Not observed for 2018)

2 Kings 5:1-14 - After being instructed by Elisha's messenger to bathe seven times in the River Jordan, Naaman was infuriated. His pride initially prevented him from obeying. Once his servants convinced him to do so, the Lord healed him, and Naaman declared, "There is no God in all the world except in Israel."

There is little hope for one who is more concerned about his dignity than his disease, but full blessing is assured to one who will humble himself as a little child and walk in the light of God's commands.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 - If athletes can give up their rights in order to win a fading olive-leaf crown, certainly Christians can lay aside privileges to win an eternal crown! Only one athlete could win each event at the Isthmian Games, but all Christians are given the opportunity to win Christ's approval.

Paul's fear of becoming a castaway had nothing to do with his salvation. He is not talking about salvation but Christian service. Running and winning the race does not save us; we run the race because we are saved (Phil. 3:12-16 and Heb. 12:1-3).

Mark 1:40-45 - Lepers were outcasts from society. Most healthy people chose to ignore them. Touching a leper was forbidden, and most people would have been revolted by the thought of it. Yet, Jesus ignores custom and common sense and touches the man. Jesus does not catch leprosy, but the leper received healing.

The law prescribed particular sacrifices if someone's leprosy were cured (Lev 14:1-32). By complying with these regulations, Jesus does nothing to violate the law or to offend the priests.

What's the Big Deal?

Let's face it... we want a big deal. To see God, we'll climb mountains, fast, or go on a spiritual retreat. And our expectation is that, when we do see Him, it will be in clouds of smoke and flames with a big, booming voice emanating from the billows. We have a lot in common with Naaman. We make finding God a big ordeal.

Today's Gospel reading reveals how eager God is to reveal Himself to us. The leper was begging and pleading for Jesus to reveal His power. Yet Jesus was already moved with compassion... reaching out His hand... touching and restoring the man.

Are we willing to give up our illusions of smoke and fire? Will we allow ourselves to see God in the everyday graces He extends to us?

Prayer:

Gracious God, empower me to walk and live by Your Spirit, pleasing You in both word and deed. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (Not observed for 2018)

Commentary coming soon!

Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany (Not observed for 2018)

Commentary coming soon!

Ninth Sunday after the Epiphany (Not observed for 2018)

Commentary coming soon!

Transfiguration Sunday, Last Sunday before Lent

2 Kings 2:1-12 - When Elijah was taken into heaven alive, Elisha begged to “inherit a double portion of [Elijah’s] spirit” (2 Kings 2:9). The request reflects Old Testament inheritance law: the oldest son and successor of his father was given a double portion. Elisha was asking to succeed Elijah as leading prophet in the land. Interestingly, the Bible also reports twice as many miracles of Elisha as Elijah (14 compared to 7).

2 Corinthians 4:3-6 - While the good news remains veiled (3:13) to some, Christ is the complete revelation of God’s glory (cf. 3:18).

Paul uses the image of a hired servant. Jesus has lent him to the Corinthians to serve them on Christ’s behalf. Moral teachers like Paul would always have to be ready to refute the charge leveled against some philosophers that they proclaimed themselves, a charge that Paul seems to refute here.

God spoke light into being at the first creation (Gen 1:3). Now, the light of Christ’s glory will shine in the hearts of those who trust him.

Mark 9:2-9 - Taking Peter, James, and John up a mountain... Jesus is transfigured in their presence. His appearance becomes white with a supernatural brightness.

The transfiguration has deep and rich theological implications. This scene included Moses representing the law; Elijah representing the prophets; and Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of both. Both Moses and Elijah had triumphant departures. The exodus of Jesus would be a greater triumph than either of the others.

Follow The Yellow Brick Road

Dorothy, Scare Crow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion knew it... just follow the yellow brick road. So they walked. And walked. And walked some more until – finally – they reached the Emerald City. And when they arrived, eager to ask for their heart’s most fervent desire, they discovered they had possessed it all along. It simply took the journey to reveal it.

Today’s readings give us the same perspective on our spiritual desires. We want to see Jesus more fully revealed in our lives. But it takes a journey to see His glory fully manifested and our lives transformed. Elisha walked with his mentor and God’s chosen leader until both men finally saw the chariot of fire. Elijah was taken to heaven where God was fully revealed. But the journey had prepared Elisha for a deeper, fuller revelation of God’s Spirit and power.

Peter, James, and John had walked with Jesus for some time before making the trek up the mountain. Their journeys with Jesus had prepared them to see the revelation of Christ as Messiah on the mountain. And this revelation prepared them for the continuing journey of seeing Christ died and risen and their role in establishing the Church of Christ here on earth.

We’re on a journey as well. Day by day, step-by-step, we get a little closer to seeing Jesus. And at the end of our own “yellow brick road,” we discover He’s been with us all along. It simply takes the journey to fully reveal His presence and our resulting transformation.

Prayer:

Almighty God, open my eyes to see the glory of Your presence illuminating my life and lighting my steps. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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