

Christ Church, Montpelier, Vermont
Sermon, Year A, Epiphany and Baptism of Jesus¹
8 January 2017, for the 8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Services
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How the Light Gets In

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**In the Name and praise of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustaining Light.
Amen.**

Good morning.

The fact that the recent Christmas and January 1st both fell on a Sunday causes some challenge with the readings and music for the liturgical calendar. On one hand, the liturgical calendar for today is based on the Baptism of Jesus. But that would bypass the Epiphany, commemorating the events we just heard in the Gospel, and which is usually celebrated on a Sunday of its own. I asked Paul if we could do the liturgy and readings for Epiphany as I felt strongly drawn to offer some reflection on Light and living in January 2017. Paul agreed, and we celebrate both the Epiphany and Baptism of Jesus today.

The fears and machinations of King Herod are a prominent part of the events related in today's Gospel, including that he was "frightened" of this new born baby. I came to a better understanding of the reason for Herod's fear from Rev. Bob Meyers' sermon last week, on how the reported events fit with Scriptural prophecies of a new

¹ **Readings for Epiphany:**

Isa. 60:1-6 ("Arise, shine; for your light has come");

Ps. 72:1-7, 10-14 (Prayer for Guidance and support of the King: "Give the King your justice, O God ... that he may rule your people righteously and the poor with justice;");

Ephesians 3:1-12 ("*...so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities...in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and faith in him.*")

Matthew: 2:1-12 (wise men from the East followed the star to where it stopped over the place where Jesus lay, gave gifts ("and having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.")

Gospel for the Baptism of Jesus: Matthew 3:13-17 (*Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove on him, and a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'*)

leader of the Jewish people. That would be trouble for Herod and the Emperor's expectation that Herod exercise control over any potential challenge to Roman authority. Herod could have had the wise men executed on the spot, but instead decided to *use them* to find this new born baby, under the guise that he would then pay homage; then he would have the child killed. My guess is he would then have the wise men executed as well. However, as recounted in today's Gospel, the wise men were warned in a dream to not return to Herod and they returned to their country.

And in the next passage from Matthew following today's Gospel, Joseph was warned by an angel to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt because Herod was about to destroy the child, and to stay in Egypt until the angel told him to return. Herod, realizing he had been tricked, was enraged and had every child in and around Bethlehem under the age of two killed. We don't have to go any further than recent news to envision any of that, including the intentional bombing of hospitals in Aleppo, Syria.

So, tell me about finding and following the Light amidst all the hurt we see.

The Bridge, is a local free, bi-weekly newspaper. Its above-the-fold cover for the 2nd half of November was a color photo of a Vermont pastoral scene, on which was printed a verse from the Canadian songwriter, poet and singer Leonard Cohen, who had died the week before:

Ring the bells that still can ring,

Forget your perfect offerings,

There's a crack in everything,

That's how the light gets in.

That's from a song he wrote called *Anthem*. Mr. Cohen didn't usually explain his words but he reportedly commented on these, saying: "This is not the place where you can make things perfect, not in your marriage, not in your work ...not your love of God, nor your love of family or country There is a crack in everything you can put together ... But that's where the light gets in, and that's where the resurrection is...[and] that's where the repentance is." ²

This verse – *forget your perfect offerings/ there's a crack in everything/ that's how the light gets in* -- has been on my mind and soul recently. It is what I believe. I think it fits well with our Episcopal /Anglican tradition, which includes respect and recognition of variance and ambiguity in our lives and beliefs. Jesus met people where they are, not one of whom was perfect. Jesus is ready to meet us where we are, again and again, imperfection after imperfection.

We can find light by helping others. Don't get stopped because it isn't perfect, because all the ducks aren't in a row. Perhaps one thing the effort is missing is something you could bring. But, we can say, it's not clear how or whether this could be done, and I don't even know if my help would make any difference? But isn't that how much of life is? There are few things that are certain, but one of them is the love of Jesus Christ. Look what he gave up, that we might have life, and have it abundantly.³

Or there may be the defensive thought that I can't do this because it might remind me of hurt and re-open old wounds. The late Henri Nouwen had some thoughts on that – he was a Dutch Catholic priest, theologian and author, who was

² <https://qz.com/835076/leonard-cohens-anthem-the-story-of-the-line-there-is-a-crack-in-everything-thats-how-the-light-gets-in/>

³ John: 10:10.

very interested in pastoral ministry and social justice.⁴ Here's one quote from his aptly titled book, *The Wounded Healer*: "The great illusion of leadership is that that [a person] can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there."⁵ I can't do it because I've been hurt? Turn it around: Because I've been hurt, because I've been wounded, I can help. And that might provide surprising illumination and healing of our own wounded heart.

There are so many varied opportunities to help. The Good Samaritan Haven in Barre provides temporary shelter for the homeless. They recently conducted an unusual and successful fundraiser, in cooperation with local faith communities, where volunteers camped out on a winter night with sponsorship donations to the Haven shelter. Somebody had an idea, they talked about it with others, and the word spread; some people volunteered to camp out, others contributed money. And some presently homeless people knew that people who could be in their own bed at home chose to sleep out on a winter's night to help them.

Consider: What did Joseph and Mary know about where to go or how to get along in Egypt? No Fodor's Guide, no Internet, no credit card to see them through. In addition to faith, they must have relied on and had the help of strangers. One can imagine that most of the strangers were doing something else when these foreigners came by with a baby, homeless and needing a helping hand, water, information, and perhaps shelter. There are homeless in our area. People of this church, in cooperation with other people, are seriously exploring the replacement of our aging parish hall structure with multi-level affordable housing units. The Episcopal Diocese

⁴ Image Book, a division of Doubleday Publ. (1979),

⁵ Nouwen's original word, in the manner of his time, was "a man."

of Vermont has set a good example and model of how that might be done with its Cathedral Square housing, and in other locations in Vermont.

We know that the family of Joseph and Mary were not the first refugees seeking to escape violence and persecution, and not the last. One hundred Syrian and Iraqi refugees begin arriving in Rutland, Vermont next month. I hope many of us can be helpful to them in some way, including holding them in our hearts and prayers.

The Gospel of Matthew in Year A tells of Jesus being baptized by John and the Spirit of God descending like a dove on Jesus.⁶ This service will proceed with the renewal of our Baptismal vows. One of the questions in the Episcopal Baptismal Covenant is this: *Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?* Notice that the question is *not* whether you will strive for justice and peace *among all the people you agree with*. And respecting the dignity of every human being does not exclude those who dress differently, who have a different faith, or different culture, or no money.

People who live in Vermont tend to be proud of our State. Part of that pride is founded on being respectful of others, be it stopping for pedestrians crossing a street, being courteous in lines, helping a stranger with directions, even going out of our way. Simply taking the time *to listen* can be a huge sign and gift of respect. I suggest we reflect on the challenge of truly listening to those whose views or ways may be different than ours as a way of living out the commitment to respect the dignity of every human being. Keep in mind that the prayer book's response to each of these Baptismal Covenants is, "I will, with God's help." Forget your perfect offerings. Look for light

⁶ Matt: 3:13-17.

coming through a crack, and realize that you may bring light. Be open to grace.

Amen.

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