We Need Epiphanies, Desperately!
Eph 1, Baptism of Our Lord; Is. 42:1-9; Matt. 3:13-17, 1/8/17
Robert Woody

Sermon-in-a-Sentence: In a world where the impact of religion and Christianity and the Jesus Way, has greatly diminished, we, individually as Jesus Followers, and the Church desperately need Epiphanies to wake us up and show us the Way.

Children’s Sermon:

Today is the first Sunday of the Season of Epiphany. What’s an Epiphany? It’s what I’d call a personal spiritual awakening or insight. A moment when you hear or experience God’s voice giving you guidance.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus had an Epiphany when he was baptized by John. What happened? When he was dunked in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, as he came up out of the water, suddenly he saw heaven open up, and the Spirit descended like a dove and landing on his shoulder, and he heard a voice saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We don’t know if anyone else saw heaven open up or the Spirit coming down like a dove or heard the voice of God. It was a personal experience of God speaking to and affirming Jesus in an very unusual, special way. That’s what an Epiphany is – it’s a personal, unusual experience of seeing or hearing God’s voice helping us to follow God’s way.

Have you ever had an Epiphany experience, where God somehow got your attention and told you what God wanted you to do? I had one back when I was in my early thirties and was still practicing law. I went by myself to a George Winston piano concert. George Winston was becoming famous for his wonderful music, which for me, was very Creation oriented and helped me connect with God’s Creation and gave me a sense of peace. I was about to be promoted to partner in my law firm, which was a big deal. But in the middle of the concert, I heard this voice in my head, very clearly saying, “You need to leave your law practice and move up to the Catskill mountains and start listening for a new calling and new direction for your life.” What? Who’s talking to me? Do what? That doesn’t make sense! But I could not get that message out of my head. I knew I had to do it. So I did.

Guess where that Epiphany led me? Right here. That was the beginning of my call to become a priest. I didn’t know it at the time, but that’s where it all began, in the middle of a George Winston piano concert.

All of us have Epiphanies, like Jesus did when he was baptized and like I did at that concert. But often we don’t listen. We ignore God’s voice. We miss out on God’s call. Sometimes we are distracted. We are focused on too many other things so we miss God’s Epiphany. But if you are willing to listen for God’s voice, I promise that you will have Epiphanies in your life, moments like Jesus had, and like I had, where you clearly hear God’s voice telling you the way God wants you to go.

Are you willing to keep your ears and your heart open to hear God’s voice? If you do, you will be blessed by Epiphanies!

Adult Sermon:

One of the Epiphany stories we remember as we begin the season of Epiphany is the three Wise Men. They had a radical Epiphany. Somehow God spoke to them and sent them on a crazy adventure. They were not from the Jewish tradition, but God spoke to them and told them they needed to follow a star to see something happening that would change the world. So they did. They followed the star to Bethlehem, out of
their country and world and into a new one, and they honored the birth of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. These were not Christians or Jews, but they were holy people who knew how to listen for the voice of God and were willing to follow God’s voice. What a radical detour in their spiritual journeys!

I desperately need some new Epiphanies. We all do.

This is a time when I need to listen for and hear God’s voice, showing me the Way. I had an Epiphany, or series of Epiphanies during my sabbatical and in the few weeks after I returned, in which I believe God was calling me to run for Suffragan or assistant Bishop. So I put my name in the hat. And over the past three months, I’ve been listening and trying to discern, “If I am elected, how does God want me to lead?” We are facing very challenging times for the Church and for our diocese. I’ve had lots of ideas, but it’s not completely clear yet. I need another Epiphany, or series of Epiphanies.

And if I’m not elected, what direction should I be leading Reconciliation? I’ve got lots of ideas, some of which were generated during my sabbatical. But again, I need a clear Epiphany, as your priest.

The wider Church needs an Epiphany, or series of Epiphanies. We are entering very difficult and challenging times in our world and in our nation. How do we respond to the surges of hate, violence and greed in our world today? Do we as Christians, as followers of Jesus, who are supposed to be radical neighbor lovers, just ignore it? We can’t ignore it! But what do we do? I don’t know. We need Epiphanies!

All of us, who claim to be members of the Body of Christ, need an Epiphany, or a series of Epiphanies, to guide us through these complicated, challenging and confusing times. We need to hear God’s voice and see more clearly the direction God is pointing us. What are we supposed to be standing up for, marching for, pouring ourselves out for?

I think the Church is in a deepening transition crisis. Many of us have our fingers in our ears trying to hold on to the old model of Church. We are not striving and stretching to hear God’s voice to guide us in new directions in these changing times, directions that hold on to the core of our faith and yet also resonates with younger generations.

And I’m not the only one who thinks we are in crisis. A few days ago, Sam Gilliam sent me a reflection by Richard Rohr. Most of you know who Richard Rohr is. For those who don’t, he is a Catholic Franciscan priest who leads a movement and retreat center called Center for Action and Contemplation. He shares daily reflections that many Christians read. Here’s some excerpts from his reflection titled “Making Christianity Relevant Again”:

“Our religion is not working well. Another year has ended—a new year begins—in which suffering, fear, violence, injustice, greed, and meaninglessness still abound. This is not even close to the reign of God that Jesus taught. And we must be frank: in their behavior and impact upon the world, Christians are not much different than other people.

“The majority of Christians are not highly transformed people, but tend to reflect their own culture more than they operate as any kind of leaven within it. I speak especially of American Christians, because I am one. . . .

“Let’s be honest: religion has probably never had such a bad name. Christianity is now seen as “irrelevant” by many and often as part of the problem more than any kind of solution. Some of us are
almost embarrassed to say we are Christian because of the negative images that word conjures in others’ minds. Young people especially are turned off by how judgmental, exclusionary, impractical, and ineffective Christian culture seems to be. As we saw in the recent U.S. election, Christians overall showed little prophetic or compassionate presence.

“Most Christians have not been taught how to plug into the “mind of Christ;” thus they often reflect the common mind of power, greed, and war instead.”

For those who were here last Sunday, on New Year’s Day, you heard me preach from Philippians, chapter 2, where Paul challenges Christians to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” emptying ourselves, acting not out of selfish ambition, but humility, regarding others as better than ourselves, not looking out for our own interests, but the interests of others. That’s what I think Fr. Rohr is referring to. Instead of the “mind of Christ” most Christians today reflect “the common mind of power, greed, and war.” We are focused more on ourselves than those in need and those who are threatened, like immigrants, our Muslims neighbors, people of color. Rohr continues:

“Throughout the history of Christianity, it would seem Jesus’ teaching has had little impact, except among people who surrendered to great love and great suffering. Could this be the real core of the Gospel? Such people experience God [have had Epiphanies] rather than merely having disconnected ideas about God. . . . We must rediscover what St. Francis called the “marrow of the Gospel.” It’s time to rebuild from the bottom up. If the foundation is not solid and sure, everything we try to build on top of it is weak and ineffective. Perhaps it’s a blessing in disguise that so much is tumbling down around us. It’s time to begin again.”

We individually, and we as the Church, the Body of Christ in these challenging times, need Epiphanies, desperately! We cannot stick our heads in the sand and ignore what is happening, or not happening in our world, in our country in the Church and in our faith communities. God is not going to speak from the top down. As Fr. Rohr says, God will rebuild from the bottom up. It is up to each of us to listen for Epiphanies, guiding us personally, and guiding us as a community, as to how we need to respond in this time of challenge and crisis. And if we don’t listen, the current model of the Church is going to continue to shrink and die.

This is not easy. What am I supposed to do as a priest, as a follower of Jesus? At what level am I supposed to step out and challenge the lack of Love in our world, and the overabundance of fear and hate? How far, how fast am I supposed to push my faith community?

We need Epiphanies. And we will not hear God’s voice unless we are willing to intentionally open our hearts, our minds, our eyes. Jesus had his Epiphany in a deep spiritual, sacramental moment; as he was being baptized. We need to be intentional as a community and individually to prepare ourselves to experience and recognize moments of Epiphany — In times of worship, when you come to the altar for communion, in times of meditation and silence, during retreats, through reading of Scripture through intentional listening projects like Appreciative Inquiry process we did a few years ago.
As I mentioned in the Children’s Sermon, one of my greatest Epiphanies came when I went to a concert to hear the piano music of George Winston. Although I did not specifically think of it as “sacramental” experience, this was the music that had been connecting me with Creation and the mystery of the Creator. It was a “holy” moment for me, which opened me up to an Epiphany experience.

You will probably not have Epiphanies unless you intentionally create a time and space where you minimize distractions and open up your heart and spirit. We will not have Epiphanies as a faith community, unless we are intentional about creating sacred moments and opportunities to listen for God’s voice.

We are in a time when we individually, as a faith community, as the Church, *desperately* need Epiphanies.

Welcome to the Season of Epiphany.