

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, January 10, 2016
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Blessed by God

We are in the season of Epiphany. The first definition given by Webster's dictionary of the word "epiphany" relates to the word when it begins with the capital letter "E". It says that "Epiphany" (with a capital "E") relates specifically to the Day of Epiphany, January 6. This is the day that commemorates the coming of the Magi (or the Wise Ones) as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. This year we celebrated and studied this story from the Gospel of Matthew on Sunday, December 27.

Webster's second definition of the word "epiphany" is: "an appearance or manifestation particularly of a divine being." I want to dispel the idea that such an appearance of God or manifestation of a "divine being" must be so specific and so extraordinary that we do not imagine ourselves capable of such a spiritual experience. Rather I suggest that such epiphanies may have occurred to each of us in the past if we have recognized these spiritual occurrences; and may occur to each of us today or in the future if we are open and awake to experiencing them.

I want to share two examples of times that I have had two specific and powerful experiences of the manifestation of a divine being. The first of these was in a dream. I experienced God as a bright light that I could only describe as representing "unconditional love". One night, in the midst of a most difficult life experience, I had a dream that consisted of many of the components which had been described to me as common to near-death experiences – being out of my body, floating through time and space, standing before a judge, and finally, being surrounded by this bright light. I dreamed that the light carried me high above the earth – I could see the planet earth beneath me. I then noticed – in my dream - a moment of fear that I might actually be dying. But the fear vanished almost immediately with the understanding that I was going to be able to return to the earth, return to my body, and wake up to enjoy this epiphany experience as a spiritual foundation for the rest of my life. This wonderful experience of God as unconditional love has stayed with me for more than two decades.

My second experience of a "divine being" occurred when I was attending the annual meeting of the National Hospice Organization in 1982. I was a regionally elected representative to their Board of Directors. I experienced a deep betrayal by another board member. I felt that I had been manipulated. In my judgment the result was that the views of the full Board were misrepresented to the entire national gathering.

The epiphany occurred during an evening meeting of our regional group. I shared the story of what had happened through tears that represented a sense of deep failure. Following the meeting, my friend – who was a hospice nurse – spoke these words to me: "Howard, I don't know what you believe about spiritual visions and the existence of spirit guides or guardian

angels. I don't ask you to believe what I am going to tell you, but I just ask you to be open to hearing it. Tonight, in the midst of your tears, I saw your Guardian Angel sitting on your right shoulder. He was a young man in his twenties dressed in Roman garb. I want you to know that he is good and he is available to you. I hope that you can trust your intuition because he is guiding you." This was an epiphany for me since from that time on – more than 30 years ago – I truly have trusted, more deeply, my intuition when making decisions and have trusted that God was guiding me when I trusted my intuition.

Please consider, now, the ways in which God has appeared to you during your lives? Have you seen an image in your mind's eye of God? Have you heard God's voice? Have you felt God's touch as a warm embrace? Has God appeared to you in a dream? Have you experienced God's presence in worship, in music, in singing of the hymns? Or have you seen God as manifested in another human being? Someone who you considered "saintly"? Or have you seen God manifest in someone who taught you or influenced you in your Christian life? Next Sunday we will mark the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. Many of us who lived through the turbulence of racial riots during the 60's might see God as manifest in Martin Luther King, Jr. He certainly has had a lasting influence on me and on my Christian life. I hope that you will share some of your experiences of the manifestation of a "divine being" with me and with one another.

Today, on the First Sunday of the season of Epiphany, we are celebrating the Baptism of Jesus. In our text for today, Luke shares an epiphany for Jesus that was also witnessed by all those present during the baptism of Jesus. There were three elements to this epiphany story. The first is that the heavens opened. The second is when Luke emphasizes that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus "in the bodily form of a dove". The third is God's voice is heard. God says, *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* (Luke 3:22)

As I studied this text, I found myself asking the question, "Why would Jesus go to John the Baptist to be baptized?" What were the historical roots that influenced John the Baptist? Commentator Kate Matthews Huey says *"Like Jesus, John the Baptist is a good Jewish prophet who knows the traditions of his people, including the cleansing bath taken by Jews for various religious reasons and by Gentiles when they convert to Judaism... This baptism by John is about forgiveness of their sins, but it went farther when it set people apart as a community for the new world."*¹

Therefore, I understand Jesus participating in baptism as representing his desire to demonstrate his connection to both his Jewish faith and to his connection to this new community that John prophesized about and that Jesus was to fulfill through his life, ministry, death and resurrection.

Today, as we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, we are also invited to remember our own baptism and to renew our vows. In relationship to the meaning of baptism for all of us, Matthews continues, *"It seems to me that this makes baptism much more than a personal,*

¹ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_january_10_2016

private thing between an individual and God. Instead, it's a powerful bonding experience after which nothing is ever the same, for we understand that we now belong to something much greater than ourselves, this new community engaged with God in the transformation of the world, in bringing a new world to reality at long last.”²

Webster’s dictionary has a third definition of the word “epiphany”. It is: “ a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something. Therefore, I suggest that we can also understand an epiphany as an “ah ha” moment. I have had a few of those during our Interim Ministry Time together – like coming to understand how the Board of Deacons performs multiple ministries often not recognized or fully appreciated; like watching and participating in Loaves and Fishes as a miracle of dedication and service; like listening to questions from our confirmands who truly are seeking to learn about peace and justice; and the list from this faithful community could go on and on.

However, we are all prone to missing our epiphanies, to missing our “ah ha” moments. We miss them if we are caught up in concerns over scarcity; if we are overwrought by demands of work, family and other obligations; if we see our church engagement as just another obligation; if we underestimate our self-worth; if we fail to see ourselves as “blessed by God”; if we allow our spirits to be defeated by fear or sadness or uncertainty; then we miss these epiphanies – whether they have occurred in the past or will happen in the future. The reality is that God has been and will be powerfully present in our spirit and in our lives, if we seek God’s presence and if we are open to moments of epiphany.

Time did not permit us to fully explore our Old Testament text from Isaiah. The key message however, is found in these prophetic words, “*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*” (Isaiah 43: 1b). In baptism, God calls us by our name. In baptism God claims us as God’s own.

The message of Jesus’ baptism was that he was beloved and blessed by God. The message of our baptism is that we are beloved and blessed by God.

I close with these additional words from Kate Matthews Huey.

“In this Epiphany season, there is no doubt that we will be blessed to witness the workings of God's Spirit in many and marvelous ways, from the smallest kindnesses to great healings, from stories of reconciliation and newfound faith to visions of ministry in this world that God loves.”³

May it be so for us today. Amen.

² http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_january_10_2016

³ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_january_10_2016