
Epiphany Calling
Martin Grove United Church
January 10, 2016
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 8:14-7 and Luke 3:15-22

I remember as a child in church, being somewhat confused about how it was that Mary and Joseph in the Bible did not have last names, but somehow Jesus did. His last name, as we all knew back then was “Christ”. And why was I always given the evil eye in church when I referred to Jesus’s father as “Joseph Christ”. The answer to that was far more complicated than I ever imagined when I was a child. In fact, the evil eye I used to endure may have been because the question was simply too profound.

But the short answer as I’m sure you know is that “Christ” was never intended as a last name. “Christ” was a title, a position, a statement about who Jesus was - not a name as such. And who and when was it decided that Jesus was “The Christ”? By tradition, it was not so much decided as it was revealed. This revelation - which we call “Epiphany” - happened in three parts, and all of those parts are included in the celebration of Epiphany.

These three parts to the revelation of Jesus are special in the sense that they all happened before Jesus started his public ministry. They are revelations made by others before Jesus ever made any statements about himself, and who he thought he was.

The first revelation, chronologically, was the visit of the Magi to Jesus, traditionally accepted to have happened 12 days after Jesus’s birth. That’s where the January 6 date comes from. It is considered a revelation because the Magi - who were foreign sorcerers - recognized who Jesus was - recognized Jesus as more than just a baby. In Canada, we often only see the Magi during Advent, as they make their way around the sanctuary during a pageant, or into the manger scene. But in other countries, the Magi’s importance goes beyond Christmas - as indeed the Magi could not logically appear until after the birth of Jesus, or they would have had no one to visit. In Puerto Rico, for example, it is traditional for children to fill a box with grass or hay and put it under their

beds during Epiphany. While the children are sleeping, the Magi take the grass to feed their camels and leave gifts in place of the grass. It's a bit like leaving cookies and milk out for Santa Claus, which Santa takes in exchange for presents.

The second revelation, which we read this week, was at Jesus's baptism. In the text, after Jesus was baptized, the spirit came down on Jesus as a dove, and a voice from heaven said "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." That's the second revelation - the second epiphany.

The third revelation happened at the wedding feast in Cana we find in John chapter 2, which we will read next week. That simple story of hope at a time when Jesus is completely surrounded by no wine. Jesus changes water used for ceremonial washing into wine, and everyone is delighted. That story concludes with these words - "This act in Cana of Galilee was the first sign Jesus gave, the first glimpse of his glory. And his disciples believed in him."

This story is therefore also a part of Epiphany. Although Jesus performs a public act - changing water to wine - it is still considered part of epiphany because the story starts with Jesus's mother recognizing Jesus as someone special. She declares Jesus's glory - or at least his wine making abilities - before Jesus is willing to declare it himself.

So, Jesus was recognized in three ways: by foreign magicians who would have known little and cared even less for Jewish traditions, by John the baptizer by witness of the spirit coming on Jesus during Jesus's baptism, and by his own mother. Jesus was recognized by strangers, friends, and family. Jesus was recognized as "The Christ". That's the Epiphany.

The word "epiphany" has other meanings of course. In general terms, epiphany means a sudden realization, or comprehension of the larger meaning of something. We often symbolize an epiphany as a light above someone's head. In particular, as a light bulb above someone's head that switches on at precisely the point that the person has their insightful thought. That's why we call it a "bright idea", right?

But to me, the light bulb is a strange symbol to use for a sudden realization. Yes, it's true that light bulbs do go on and off. But it's also true that the light bulb itself was

an idea that took almost 80 years to develop. The idea of incandescent light took 80 years to actually “turn on”. So, perhaps instead of thinking about epiphany as a person with a lightbulb above their head that turns on instantly, maybe we should imagine a lightbulb that is turned on using a dimmer switch. And in some cases, it takes a long time for the dimmer switch to change from “fully off” to “fully on”.

Even in the epiphany of Jesus, we see a dimmer switch at work. Not everyone who met Jesus instantly recognized who he was – not even his own disciples. It can take time to recognize Jesus in our midst.

In the United Church of Canada, the celebration of Epiphany is not a single day, but a season. The season runs from January 6 - the date that commemorates the visit by the Magi - to Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent. The “event” of figuring out who Jesus really is is not accomplished in a day. We give over an entire season to that.

Historically, not even a season was enough. In the year 381 CE, Gregory of Nyssa wrote that the city where he lived was alive with debate about who Jesus was and how Jesus related to God and the spirit. I quote: “The whole city is full of it, the squares, the marketplaces, the crossroads, the old-clothes men, money changers, food sellers: They are all busy arguing. If you ask someone to give you change, he philosophizes about the Begotten and the Unbegotten; if you inquire about the price of a loaf, you are told by way of a reply that the Father is greater and the Son inferior; if you ask ‘Is my bath ready?’ the attendant answers that the Son was made out of nothing.” People were arguing, and thinking - passionately - about Jesus’s identity - what it means to be “The Christ” - 350 years after Jesus died. And even then, people did not come to a final answer that everyone agreed with.

Even today, the identity of Jesus is not something that we can nail down. As part of my journey into ministry in the United Church of Canada at my final ordination interview I was asked - again - “Who is Jesus for you?” The question is still alive because we have not nailed down the identity of Jesus completely, or the importance of his ministry into a single short answer.

Don't get me wrong - I am not saying that we have no idea who Jesus was and who Christ is. It's just that we have different views, different perspectives. And it has been interesting for me to hear some of your answers to the question of Jesus's identity - which came up during our discussion groups before Christmas - as well as at other times. The question of the identity of Jesus is - in spite of the epiphany - still a live topic.

But perhaps Epiphany is not just about the identity of Christ. Perhaps epiphany is also about our own identity. I am going to be so bold as to suggest that while we are seeking the identify of Jesus this season, we should also be sensitive to searching for our own identity as a congregation. What does it mean to recognize Christ in our midst here in Rexdale in 2016? What does it mean to be the body of Christ for others here in Rexdale in 2016?

Do we need a revelation to find our own identity? To find ourselves? Perhaps. Perhaps we hope and expect a voice of revelation to come from the magi - or in our case, from new people who bring new perspectives to this congregation. Perhaps we hope and expect a voice of revelation from the spirit as a dove - or in our case, from the spirit in one of many, many forms. Perhaps we hope and expect a voice of revelation from family - or in our case, from our own history and traditions.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps a revelation will come simply from all of us, sharing our hopes and fears, our dreams and our disappointments. Perhaps a revelation will come as we share our lives together - openly and honestly - as a community of faith.

Once again, we are in the season of epiphany. And once again, we are all invited to consider the question, "Who is Jesus" Or more specifically, "Who is Jesus for you?" I invite each of us to be open to hearing that question in new ways this year. I invite each of us to live into new answers this year too.

Epiphany is calling. How will we respond?

Amen.