

WHAT IS EPIPHANY?

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WHAT IS EPIPHANY?

Epiphany is a celebration in the Christian liturgical year occurring Jan. 6.

WHAT IS EPIPHANY? THE FESTIVAL OF THEOPHANY

Written by Dr. Edith Humphrey, William F. Orr Professor of New Testament

WORSHIP OF THE TRINITY WAS MADE MANIFEST

I remember when I first encountered the Orthodox Church, I was surprised at the “spin” that they put on the feast of Theophany, celebrated at the same time as the Western Epiphany. I was not used to contemplating the Holy Trinity at this time of year, but accustomed to focusing upon the adoration of Jesus as the Messiah by the Gentile Magi, followed by the Father’s ratification of Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan at the octave, eight days later.

On the surface, the story of Jesus’ baptism highlights Jesus the Man, undergoing the initiation rite of the Jewish people when

he was plunged into the Jordan—the river that marked the first moment of the Hebrews’ entry into their promised land. John the Baptizer had called all the faithful back to the moment of origin, in a rite usually reserved for converts to Judaism. But when we contemplate this event, we move naturally from its outer revelation, the epiphany of Jesus as Messiah, to the inner mystery, the shocking identity of this One who “fulfills all righteousness.” Indeed, this One IS divine righteousness personified. In his baptism, God the Son enacts a deep solidarity with God’s people. Not needing baptism for repentance himself, he shows forth his utter identification with our human plight: vulnerably he embraces our weakness, as he will again on the Cross. The Light of lights is plunged deep into the river of the Jordan, down into the primal element of water! That light is never extinguished: for upon its re-emergence, the Light of the Son is met by two Others, with whom he is yet One. The Spirit, as a dove, alights in suitable comfort upon the One who is both our anointed Human representative, and God incarnate; The Father’s voice sounds approval of his Messiah, and communion with God the Son – “this is my Son, my chosen, with whom I am well pleased.” There is no mistaking it: we see more than an anointed one for our sake. An inner mystery is there for those with eyes to see and ears to hear:

When You, O Lord were baptized in the Jordan
The worship of the Trinity was made manifest
For the voice of the Father bore witness to You
And called You His beloved Son.
And the Spirit, in the form of a dove,
Confirmed the truthfulness of His word.
O Christ, our God, You have revealed Yourself
And have enlightened the world, glory to You!

When Orthodox Christians celebrate this feast, as one of the very earliest feasts of the Church, on Jan. 6, the actions, prayers, and hymns poignantly recall Jesus’ baptism. The service ends with the great prayer which remembers the way that the whole cosmos is meant to glorify God. A basin of water stands, surrounded by flowers and candles, and Christ is called upon to sanctify the water, creation, and all people by the indwelling of the Holy and Good and Life-creating Spirit. The priest plunges the cross into the water three times, and then as this (hymn) of the feast is sung, and sprinkles water in all four directions. He then walks through the congregation, sprinkling the people. Those gathered for worship take holy water back to their homes, and for the next few weeks the priest is invited to many parish homes, where prayers, sprinkling of water, and blessing takes place yet again. In this way, Orthodox recall how the whole of creation, and their own lives, have been effectively marked by the “showing forth of God” (Theo-phany) at Christ’s Baptism, where the God-Man was revealed in the flesh, and where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acted in concert.

WHAT IS EPIPHANY? A BRIDGE FROM CHRISTMAS TO ORDINARY TIME

Written by the Rev. Dr. John P. Burgess, James Henry Snowden Professor of Systematic Theology

Based on Ephesians 5:6-20

LIGHT OF LIGHT

God is light, says the Gospel of John, and that light has come into the world, and the darkness has not overcome it. We love the light—or do we? Light can also be blazing and blinding.

For 12 days, Christians celebrate the light of Christ—from Christmas to Epiphany. As Christmas ends, will we live in the light, or will we put it out? The gospel tells us that we couldn’t put it out even if we wanted to. It is in us and around us; it is who we are. “You are the light of the world,” declares Jesus. Me? You? Light? What can that mean?

We modern people do not know just how amazing light must have been to ancient peoples. We live in an era of street lights, car lights, store lights, strobe lights, flashing lights, beaming lights, and spot lights—never-ending, artificial light. I wonder what it was like in ancient days when it really got dark at night, when you couldn’t even see your hand in front of your face.

Humans have always been drawn to light because light helps us see where we are and where we are headed. So it is no wonder that early Christians called Jesus the light of the world. He is like the sun that takes away the darkness of life. He is radiant, glorious. As Charles Wesley wrote, “Christ, whose glory fills the skies, Christ, the true, the only light, Sun of Righteousness, arise, Triumph o’er the shades of night”

Because early Christians associated Jesus with light, they celebrated his birth just after the winter solstice, as the days slowly start to become longer again. The Nicene Creed calls Jesus “God of God, Light of Light.” Or look sometime at paintings from the Middle Ages and how they depict the birth of Christ. Jesus lies on the ground or in the manger, just after his birth. Light shines from heaven upon him, and he in turn radiates that light into the world.

For most of us, Epiphany is just a blip on the charts, but in the early church Epiphany was even more important than Christmas. Epiphany was the celebration of God’s revelation of Christ to the world. The point was not the birth of Jesus, but rather the manifestation of Jesus to the world. Epiphany declares that Christ has come; Christ is risen; Christ will come

again.

Ephesians 5:6-20 tells us just what happens when this light comes into the world. Yes, it shows us where we are and where we are headed. But this light does something even more—something both wonderful and frightening. The light of Jesus Christ shows us who we really are—light, just as Jesus is light.

To be truly human is to live with a sense of God's good light, especially by giving thanks that there is a God who gives us life and will preserve us in this world and the next. But to live in the light of Jesus Christ is also frightening, because when we see who we really are, we see sides of ourselves we would rather not see.

Paul, however, makes it clear that for Christians the light is unavoidable. Christians are now children of light; so let us be light. Don't run from God; don't forget God; and don't settle for being less than who you really are. Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Avoid the darkness—expose it, in fact. Give thanks to God. And go live in the light.

[Download the full sermon.](#)

Written by Kendra Buckwalter Smith '12/'13, Worship Coordinator

EPIPHANY EXPERIENCE

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WHAT IS EPIPHANY? A TIME TO BE CREATIVE

Written by the Rev. Derek R. Davenport '05 / SYI '97, Director of Enrollment and Co-Director of the Miller Summer Youth Institute

Based on Matthew 2:1-12

GOLD, FRANKINCENSE, AND MYRRH

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It's interesting that we get those details—specifically.

Last year a picture made its way around on social media—a picture of Popsicle sticks. It was interesting because of the way the Popsicle sticks were arranged. There was no detail, but you knew it was a nativity set just because of the way the Popsicle sticks were organized. Nativity sets have become so iconic that we can recognize them in an instant—that we can see in an arrangement of Popsicle sticks the story that we know and love.

But there's something that makes me a little nervous about our ability to recognize this detail-less Popsicle-stick arrangement as a nativity set: we know the story so well that our brain strips out the context and the details. We forget how strange, how bizarre this story really is. We forget the wonder of Epiphany.

So I'm going to tell you a strange story—a story that takes up all the details that we strip out, and leaves the rest behind. A completely fabricated story that has the same details and nothing else in common with Epiphany. But it's not a story that I invented. It's a very old story . . . about a bird. The Phoenix.

Before the Phoenix was the subject of fiction, the story of the Phoenix was written down by historians and theologians—people like Herodotus and Pliny the Elder and Tacitus, people like Clement and Tertullian. And if you grab their stories about the Phoenix, and you put them together, you get a story that goes something like this . . .

[Listen to the story.](#)

This is not a true story. Ancient historians agree on that. Each one of them begins by saying, "I've never seen a Phoenix. I've only seen pictures, but this is what I've been told." Some of them say, "Here is the story as I learned it, and it's probably not true." Others say, "This sounds more like a fable than reality." But nonetheless they thought it was important to record. And this story, with the elements of gold and frankincense and myrrh, turns what we know about life and death inside out.

The Phoenix is born from a corpse, and it's buried and in an egg. Clement and Tertullian picked this up and said, "This is a symbol of resurrection." This is life that comes out of death. The story of the Phoenix forces us to look at a birth, a time of joy and celebration, and see that this worm, this tiny infant, was "born for to die." And we know how. It forces us to see a tomb and to say, "This tomb is a symbol of new life," because there's a new Phoenix that has been given life through death. The details, the gold, frankincense, and myrrh in the Phoenix story, force us to look at life and death backwards. These are the elements the Wise Men bring the Christ child—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These elements force us as we celebrate Epiphany, as we celebrate Christmas, to remember that the tender, sweet, gorgeous infant Jesus “was born for to die.” They force us at Christmas to remember Good Friday, and to remember that we come through Good Friday to Easter, and to remember that while the earth was slumbering, Jesus Christ rose and conquered death. These strange details force us to look past Epiphany through Good Friday to the story of Easter, to a God who dies to conquer death that we might have life. It’s bizarre. It’s strange. It makes no sense. The Wise Men bring gifts to an infant in a cradle, gifts that belong in a temple or a palace or a tomb. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Strange details from a bizarre story filled with wonder.

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

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