

An Epiphany with A Purpose

Rev. Ron Dunn

February 26, 2017

If you have been with us over the past several weeks, you are aware of the fact that we have been considering the power of an epiphany—the subtle or not so subtle—revelations of the way that the Spirit of God is at work in the context of our everyday lives. We have, of course, been using the medium of film to illustrate some of the ways in which grace can be revealed and conviction illustrated in the story lines of “Unbroken, Patch Adams, Glory and the Hurricane, to name just a few those films.

Some of you have shared with me just how inspiring and helpful these glimpses have been and I would agree. Through the art of film, we can see, sometimes, that which we would not otherwise see. And yes, it is our plan to revisit this medium from time to time in the future.

But, this morning, I would like to invite you to think with me about not only nature of an epiphany, but, more importantly, its purpose. It is, of course, a deeply moving experience to catch a glimpse of the holy. It’s a powerful thing to live into what Marcus Borg refers to as the “Thin Place” where the realm of the divine and the human come so close together that they almost touch. I’m wondering, this morning, if you can remember such a moment in your own life? Can you think of a time in which you took your shoes off because you knew without question that the ground you walked upon was holy?

I remember well the time that I was serving as a Park Minister at Crater Lake National Park in Oregon. I was hiking with friends to a place called, “Anderson Falls.” It was a beautiful day and the six or seven of us who were hiking were in fine spirits—laughing and joking as we bounced down the trail.

But when we came around a bend in the trail, we were suddenly confronted with one of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen.

A waterfall occupied center stage in the ravine that spread out before us. There was the sound of rushing and pounding water and the sight of green lush grass on the banks with butterflies dancing in the mist. It was breathtaking!

As if in testimony to the intense beauty of that moment, my hiking companions fell silent. Our laughter and conversation ceased and each one of us found ourselves drifting into our own sacred places. I can remember bending down and taking off my hiking boots because I had the clear and unmistakable sense that the ground I was walking on was holy ground.

It was moment of epiphany unlike any I have ever known. I felt the presence of the holy as I noticed the tears in the eyes of one of my friends. He was weeping over the beauty that we were privileged to see, smell, touch and feel.

As you can tell, that “God moment” still lives within my memory—in a very treasured place. Yet, I can’t help but wonder—as beautiful and powerful as that moment was, was that all

there was to it? Was it just a “feel good moment” that allowed me to feel close to God for a few minutes? Or was there something more involved, something that held a larger meaning and a greater purpose for my life?

It’s difficult to know for sure, but I suspect that these moments of revelation, these epiphanies that grace our lives from time to time, are not intended solely for our own experiential pleasure. I have a strong suspicion that they often point to a greater purpose beyond the moment of the holy presence.

In our lesson from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus and Peter, James and John, make their way to the top of a high mountain—a retreat, if you will, from the ebb and flow of daily life. While there, they experience an epiphany of the most dramatic kind. Mark tells us that Jesus was transfigured—that his clothes became dazzling white—whiter than any bleach could possibly bleach them. And there, before them, stood Moses and Elijah, two of the great prophets of Israel’s past. Now, as far as Epiphanies go, this was one worth writing about!

Peter is so moved, so inspired that he cannot resist opening his mouth. “Rabbi,” he said to Jesus, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Mark then adds an explanatory note concerning Peter’s comment: “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”

Isn’t that just like Peter? He was terrified so he talked! Even though he had no idea of what to say in the middle of this holy moment, he talked. “It is good to be here...so good that we want to stay here...Let us build a place for each of you to stay!”

To be sure, I can understand where Peter was coming from. Who wouldn’t want to stay right smack dab in the middle of this moment of revelation and inspiration!? Who wouldn’t want to hang on to it for as long as they could?

It was then that Peter and the others heard a voice from the cloud that overshadowed them: **“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.”** Jesus, you will remember, had heard this voice before. It was after he came up from the water of his baptism by John in the Jordan that he heard the declaration: **This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.**

Notice that these two affirmations of Jesus as God’s Beloved are the “book-ends” for the season of Epiphany. We began this season on January 8th with this affirmation and now conclude this season on February 26th with this affirmation. In both cases, these passages reveal the depth of God’s love for Jesus and God’s affirmation of Jesus’ mission in the world. A pretty impressive testimony—wouldn’t you say? How moving and affirming it must have been for Jesus! We couldn’t really blame him if he had wanted to simply bask in the moment. Who could fault him for giving Peter permission to build three dwelling places and to make a monument out of that moment?

But that is precisely what Jesus did not do. No sooner had the great moment of revelation and affirmation passed than Jesus and his disciples were working their way back down the mountain as he was telling them about the challenge and the struggle that was before him.

The epiphany on the mountain top was, for Jesus, a clear reminder of the purpose to which he had been called—a purpose he had yet to fulfill.

While it is tempting to want to make a monument out of the moments of our epiphanies, while it is understandable that we would want to allow them to become ends in and of themselves, the message here is that our epiphanies—our experiences of the holy—are not intended to be ends in and of themselves, but instead, to become the means to the end which is the fulfillment of the purpose that God has called us to fulfill.

To put it even more succinctly, to experience of the **Presence of God** invites us to fulfill **God's Purpose** for our lives. Moses took off his shoes in the presence of the holy, but this holy encounter wasn't intended to be merely a "God Moment" for his own inspirational pleasure. It also served as his call to liberate his people from their slavery under Pharaoh.

While some may be tempted to define their spirituality by how many "goose bumps" their encounter with God can generate, others understand that the true test of one's spiritual commitment lies in what it leads us to do.

The late United Methodist Bishop, Roy Nichols, told of how impressed he was, as a young boy, with the Pentecostal experience of worship—with all of its energy and passion, its leaping and its dancing. It was his mother, however, that gave him a perspective that he never forgot. "Just remember, son," she said to him, "when it comes to worship, it's not how high you can leap, but what you do when you come down."

When it comes to our epiphanies and those moments of revelation in which we are blessed by the experience of the holy, it's not about how holy or inspired we may feel in those mountain top moments. It's about what we do when we come down from the mountain. It's about how we translate the experience of God's Presence into the expression of God's Purpose for our lives.

There's a memorable line in the film, "Hook," starring Dustin Hoffman—one of my favorites. Smeede, the bumbling assistant to the conniving Captain Hook, turns to him in a moment of crisis and says with a wide eyed look: "I just had an apostrophe!" To which Captain Hook, with a roll of the eyes and a shake of the head, responds, "No, no, you bumbling fool! You mean that you had an epiphany!"

A funny exchange, to be sure. But there may be more to this line than meets the eye. An apostrophe is a punctuation mark that serves the purpose of **abbreviation**. An apostrophe makes a word smaller. An epiphany, on the other hand, serves the purpose of **revelation**. An epiphany makes the meaning of God's Word larger than we might have ever imagined.

When it comes to our own experiences of the holy, those inspiring moments of epiphany when the presence of the holy is tangible, let us not choose to abbreviate them by making them an end in themselves. Instead, let us be open to the invitation of the revelation—the invitation to allow this experience of the holy presence to enable us to fulfill our holy

purpose. It is, after all, true. It's not how high you can jump. It's what you do when you come down."

Amen.