

Sermon for Epiphany – 2007

The folk music of the 60's was my music. A whole new world opened up for me the first time I heard Joan Baez sing – then Peter, Paul and Mary and the Seekers, Arlo Guthrie, and, of course, Bob Dylan. A lot of that music was protest music, music about change, music against the status quo. Those songs burst on my young, restless, unformed conscience like a new star. They were the backdrop music for the tumultuous changes of that decade – exciting, scary, disillusioning changes that burdened my idealism and made me forever leery of traditional, business-as-usual politics and traditional, business-as-usual church. A gamut of change, stemming from the assassinations, an unsuccessful war, a moon landing, contraceptive pills, jet travel, drug use and more let to both hope and skepticism as signs of a new world emerged.

In my memory, the 60's was a decade of epiphany – a time when new realizations about what was going on in the world sprang up, when change brought upset and protest and re-ordering of priorities.

Today, we celebrate the Epiphany. The Greek word means manifestation or showing. We celebrate Jesus' coming into the world as a new epiphany of God's presence, and we tell the story of the star and the wise men, but we probably don't think of it as the startling, new, world-changing, protest sparking event that it was. Maybe we should.

We've heard the story and sung the songs so much we don't hear them. They go by in lovely procession, like the statues to the crèche, like the star to the manger. We have to re-open our eyes and ears and look hard for the real essence of this Epiphany, this new sign of God's presence with us and what that might mean. Unless we are open to what it might say to us now, it's just a nice part of the tradition, a fun part of the pageant. Epiphany is about change, then and now.

So I want to examine what hints there are in both of our readings and one of the hymns and try to bring some of that message, via the 60's, into the present. Bob Dylan's song "The Times, They Are A-Changin'" is an epiphany song – as true today as it was in 1964 when he wrote it. And his title could be applied to each of our readings this morning.

The prophet Isaiah writes of changing times for the people of Israel, their return from exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC. What he says sounds mostly positive – your light has come, people streaming back to rebuild Jerusalem, thrilled and rejoicing. But we can also notice in this that he says "nations will come to you", they all gather together, and Gentiles and foreigners from all around will be part of the new Jerusalem. Might we read into this the stresses and strains of a culture facing new diversity, widespread immigration, a need to incorporate different groups even as they re-establish their own identity? This will not be easy – epiphanies ushering in change never are. The time, they are a-changin' for Israel. There is great promise, but also challenge and hard work.

There are similarities in the Gospel story. Beyond its familiarity, the story of the magi is of strangers coming. Gentiles from the east are led by a star that draws them, we know not why. They worship different gods, yet they still respond to a new manifestation of God. Along the way they encounter corruption and hypocrisy – the evil Herod, lying and covering up, driven to protect his own political power. Following the star, the kings make a long hard journey, through a dark world.

T.S. Eliot captures this in his poem “The Journey of the Magi”. The opening, “A cold coming we had of it...just the worst time of the year” moves at the end to “we returned to our places, these Kingdoms, but, no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death.” Although the meaning here has always been elusive for me, I’m wondering if Eliot is suggesting that it is the old gods, the old tribal loyalties that need to die. “The times, they are a-changin...your old world is rapidly agin’.” We clutch at what is familiar and we fail even to glimpse what might be possible. We miss epiphanies; we miss signs of new ways of embracing and responding to God’s presence in the world.

Along with the readings, we have the lovely hymn “Brightest and best of the stars of the morning”. Did you ever notice that it’s a protest hymn? At least the 4th verse is – listen again: “Vainly we offer each ample oblation, vainly with gifts would his favor secure, richer by far is the heart’s adoration, dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.” This hymn was written in the 19th century by a man who was then the Anglican Bp. of Calcutta in India. These are not pious lines; they are a biting commentary on the emptiness of wealth as a means to win favor with God. They lift up the power of love and prayer poured out to God from people who have nothing else – and that is protest, urging re-ordering of our priorities. It is upset and discomfort as part of epiphany.

So we have these hints from the readings and the hymn, and we know as surely as in Biblical time, as surely as in the 60’s that now too, “the times, they are a-changin’”. What are the signs? Dylan wrote, back then: “Come senators, congressmen, please heed the call. Don’t stand in the doorway, don’t block up the hall. For he that gets hurt will be he who has stalled. There’s a battle outside and it is ragin’.” Compare this with some words from Eugene Robinson in the Post on Friday: “The Senate still looks like an exclusive country club that grudgingly decided to let in a few women and the occasional black guy, but the House looks a lot more like the complicated, diverse country its members are supposed to represent...The action is in the House.” Is this newly elected body an epiphany of a new time? Is a female Speaker of the House anything more than a crack in the marble ceiling? Are any of the agenda items facing them going to bring about real change – and, will this Congress, asks Robinson, tiptoe around “the big, ugly monster sitting in the middle of the room – the war in Iraq?”

Do we feel despair, the cold, dark night of the magi, as we consider failure and betrayal and denial in our body politic, as we read the books and listen to the news? Do we anxiously fear what a truly diverse yet openly inclusive society would look like and how it

might impact our own privilege? What guiding stars are there today; do we dare hope for epiphanies for our leaders or for ourselves?

I think we need both personal and grander epiphanies. Some experiences that are most real are those that are most personal – our own new recognition of the essence or meaning of something that leads us to change in the direction of wholeness and fullness of life. We can experience epiphanies in our friendships and marriages, or work, our faith – and I hope we do. These are gifts from God, and I pray we give our hearts to them.

But there are epiphanies for whole societies, whole nations and those who lead them – and the Bible stories are more about these. New comprehension is needed; acknowledgment of new realities is needed to find a way out of chaos or stuckness. These kinds of insights may be gifts from God as well – not new stars, but epiphanies just the same. I pray this season of Epiphany may bring to light some new wisdom and constructive movement on our part in Iraq. Should we continue on a course without a clearer sense of whether the burdens outweigh the benefits? There are new voices in Congress, new diplomatic and military leadership, new fervor among our citizens for a way forward. Are election results a sign to be heeded? Is the wisdom of contemporary sages important?

What is a God who shows Godself to us in the vulnerability of a tiny baby born into poverty in a still tortured part of the world trying to tell us? Isn't it that God really does live in our humanity, that how we live here and now is how we serve God? If kings then could change course, read signs, use their wealth in new ways, can't we today - can't we lavish our treasure and our adoration in ways that build up, and that usher in more justice and more peace here and abroad? Can't we put aside escalation of force and figure out a better way to influence this tragic war and move towards reconciliation? That might be a surge worth making, a worthy response to the signs, the epiphanies of our time. Amen.