

January 15, 2023
Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
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Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-12
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

Today is the second Sunday after the Epiphany. We are in the season after the Epiphany, and we will be in this season until Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. Remember, the Epiphany itself marks the arrival of the searching Magi to the newborn Jesus. It's always observed on January 6. As to why it's on that date, one Episcopal source offers this: "The winter solstice was kept on Jan. 6 at some places during the first centuries of the Christian Era. In opposition to pagan festivals, Christians chose this day to celebrate the various manifestations, or 'epiphanies,' of Jesus' divinity."¹

On the Sundays after the Epiphany, the assigned gospel readings are about various other manifestations of Jesus' divinity. Last Sunday, we heard Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism by John. I said this about it: "It's at his *baptism by John* that we first meet the adult Jesus. That's true in all four canonical gospels." I realized as I was saying that that I didn't say it quite right. I should have said that it's at his *encounter with John* that we first meet the adult Jesus, and *that's* true in all four canonical gospels. To explain, Matthew, Mark, and Luke state unequivocally that John baptizes Jesus, but John the Evangelist is cagey about that. He talks about John the Baptizer and then, as we heard today, has John the Baptizer reports on his encounter with Jesus. He never says that the Baptizer baptizes Jesus. Anyway, John the Baptist himself says that he is an instrument of divine revelation. As the witness to an epiphany, John both *observes* and *reports* the activity of the Holy Spirit.

Look up the word *epiphany* in the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, and you'll find three entries. The first is for the capitalized word, that January 6 church celebration. The second is this: "an appearance or manifestation especially of a divine being." The third has several subentries: "a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something," "an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking," "an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure," and "a revealing scene or moment."²

Aside from a few weeks of the church year, almost all talk of epiphanies is in that third, secular sense. That's true even for us churchy folks. Many times I have said to my wife, "I had an epiphany today!" But I have never said it in the sense of witnessing a manifestation of the divine I *could*, but I *don't*.

That's too bad, really. I think it reflects two functional failures in my activity as a witness: the failure to observe, and the failure to report. When it comes to epiphanies, I suspect that better reporting builds better observation, and that better observation builds better reporting. And I'm pretty sure we'd all be better off if we did more of both.

About two weeks ago, your fellow parishioner Don Edwards got me thinking about awe. We discussed at the time that this would show up in a sermon sooner or later. He flagged to me an article just out in *The New York Times*.³ I later looked for it, and found another recent article in *The Atlantic*.⁴ One is about and one is by Dacher Keltner. Keltner is a professor of psychology at Cal Berkeley and the founding director of the Greater Good Science Center. He's promoting his new book, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*.⁵

I haven't read the book, but the articles are excellent. Here's the opening of his article in *The Atlantic*:

What gives you a sense of awe? That word, *awe*—the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world—is often associated with the extraordinary. You might imagine standing next to a 350-foot-tall tree or on a wide-open plain with a storm approaching, or hearing an electric guitar fill the space of an arena, or holding the tiny finger of a newborn baby. Awe blows us away: It reminds us that there are forces bigger than ourselves, and it reveals that our current knowledge is not up to the task of making sense of what we have encountered.

But you don't need remarkable circumstances to encounter awe. When my colleagues and I asked research participants to track experiences of awe in a daily diary, we found, to our surprise, that people felt it a bit more than two times a week on average. And they found it in the ordinary: a friend's generosity, a leafy tree's play of light and shadow on a sidewalk, a song that transported them back to a first love.

We need that everyday awe, even when it's discovered in the humblest places. A survey of relevant studies suggests that a brief dose of awe can reduce stress, decrease inflammation, and benefit the cardiovascular system. Luckily, we don't need to wait until we stumble upon it; we can seek it out. Awe is all around us. We just need to know where to look for it.⁶

I did have some moments of wonder if this is simply the latest wellness fad, one in which I will again fail, and still it resonates. Maybe that because, for me, awe is sort of energy that points toward the divine. In other words, awe and epiphany go hand in hand. About the most awesome things I've seen recently are the images coming from the James Webb Space Telescope. NASA released the first Webb images back in July. Another round was released last week. They just seem to get more spectacular. A standout is the image of the Pillars of Creation.⁷ Every time I look at it, no matter how many times I look at it, I feel awe. Surely that is a manifestation of the divine.

Some of us experience awe through poetry. For Advent, our Thursday Night study group subbed out our usual Bible study with a poetry series employing the podcast “Poetry Unbound.” Due to absence-necessitated postponements, we finally had the last session on Thursday night. One of the three poems for that session, while assigned to the Advent theme of love, actually works pretty well as an Epiphany poem. It’s called “The One” and it’s by the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh. I encourage you to listen to it on the podcast, because it’s recited by another Irish poet, podcast host Pádraig Ó Tuama. As the study participants can tell you, his voice is like a soothing lullaby. My recitation won’t be the same, but I’m going to give it a go. Before I start, I should flag that, near the end, you’re going to hear the term *cut-away bog*. A cut-away bog is a bog where all the peat has already been cut away. It’s land that is no longer pristine, land that has been used and left. Here goes.

“The One” by Patrick Kavanagh

“Green, blue, yellow and red-
God is down in the swamps and marshes
Sensational as April and almost incred-
ible the flowering of our catharsis.
A humble scene in a backward place
Where no one important ever looked
The raving flowers looked up in the face
Of the One and the Endless, the Mind that has balked
The profoundest of mortals. A primrose, a violet,
A violent wild iris- but mostly anonymous performers
Yet an important occasion as the Muse at her toilet
Prepared to inform the local farmers
That beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God
Was breathing His love by a cut-away bog.”⁸

It makes sense to me that church festivals are tied to the cycles of creation—and not just because Christians needed to compete with pagans. God is the ultimate source of everything, so we exist in divinity, and we are divinity. We are powerfully reminded of that every year in the sweep of Advent and Christmas and Epiphany.

Epiphanies did not stop with the gospels. To count as epiphanies, manifestations of the divine needn’t be as momentous as John witnessing the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus. We tend to forget these things. Maybe the cultivation of *epiphany* is very much the cultivation of *awe*. If you want an epiphany, all you have to do open your senses to your surroundings, and your mind to its mysteries. To get started, you need look no farther than your own outstretched miraculous hand. Science says awe is good for us. Faith says it’s good for the world.

We are in what the church has designated the “Season After the Epiphany.” That name is really quite cumbersome. Maybe, at least for this year, we could think of it as the “Season of Awe.” This “Season of Awe,” your job, my job, is to observe and report, to be witnesses, instruments of divine revelation.

Notes

¹ “Epiphany,” An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church, Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, editors, (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated), available online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/epiphany-the/#:~:text=The%20manifestation%20of%20Christ%20to,centuries%20of%20the%20Christian%20Era> (accessed January 15, 2023).

² “epiphany,” Merriam-Webster, available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany> (accessed January 15, 2023).

³ Hope Reese, “How a Bit of Awe Can Improve Your Health,” *The New York Times*, January 3, 2023, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/well/live/awe-wonder-dacher-kiltner.html> (accessed January 15, 2023).

⁴ Dacher Kiltner, “The Quiet Profundity of Everyday Awe,” *The Atlantic*, January 3, 2023, available online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2023/01/feeling-in-awe-take-walk-visual-art/672617/> (accessed January 15, 2023).

⁵ Dacher Kiltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 2023).

⁶ Kiltner in *The Atlantic*.

⁷ The Webb image of the Pillars of Creation is widely available online, including at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nasawebbtelescope/52534406448/in/album-72177720301006030/> (accessed January 15, 2023).

⁸ “Patrick Kavanaugh: The One,” an Episode of the podcast *Poetry Unbound*, available online at <https://onbeing.org/programs/patrick-kavanaugh-the-one/> (accessed January 15, 2023). According to the podcast notes, “The One” is from Kavanaugh’s *Collected Poems*, Antoinette Quinn, editor.