

Apocalypse or Epiphany

Because we focus on retelling the nativity story on Christmas Eve the other lectionary passages for that date are rarely used as the basis of a sermon. The gospel reading for that day is always based on the second chapter of Luke and a passage from the latter portion of Isaiah is the Old Testament reading. As always there is a text from one of the Epistles, but those are usually ignored. This is especially true if the selection is from one of the shorter and more exhortative letters about how those in the congregation are to live because “the light has come”. The Christmas Epistle lesson on Christmas is from the letter from Paul to Titus. Paul gives Titus instructions for his actions and also what behaviors he is to teach. The lectionary group that gathers weekly to discuss one of the passages designated for the coming Sunday chose to look at the Titus passage the week before Christmas. Something from one of the commentaries I read in preparation for that discussion has stuck with me. This has been especially true as I considered the visit of the Magi which is celebrated by the church and is called Epiphany. That commentary indicated that our use of that word epiphany is quite different from the understanding of the contemporaries of the gospel writer. The current definitions of an epiphany in the dictionaries are: first, a Christian festival observed on January 6th or two, a moment in which you suddenly see or understand something in a new or very clear way. This makes an epiphany more like the light bulb which you see over the head of a character in a comic strip. That is not exactly what we are talking about in our Biblical texts. There are times when something I have had a hard time understanding becomes clearer. Perhaps I get an insight which sheds light on a particular problem. The tendency in our culture is to equate this with an epiphany. Wrong. Both Greek lexicons, dictionaries, when consulted have a restricted definition for the word from which epiphany is derived. To understand more about what the Magi’s visit means let’s explore the Biblical context for this word beginning with the Titus text. Titus 2:11: “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.” What stood out to me in the commentary was the fact that the Greek word translated as appeared is *epiphanies*. This same Greek word appears translated as manifestation in verse 13 of that Titus text: “while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior.” There it is referring to the “2nd coming or appearance of Christ.” Paul is closely relating the first and second appearances of Christ, and is concerned with how the people are living in the time between. *Epiphanies*¹ according in Biblical Greek means “to show oneself, to appear. Metaphorically it is God’s intervention to give light, to shine on”; or when used passively, it is when God becomes known, appears, or is manifested. Do you see the difference in how we view the light the wise men followed when we understand the origin of epiphany in the Greek? As a friend of mine sometimes tells me, It’s a God thing. God is the one who gives it and what is given is God’s self. When Paul uses the word *epiphanies* he is telling us that God has appeared in the midst of human activity; it’s not just a light shining in darkness. It is God

¹ ἐπεφάνη; intransitively in the NT; (1) *show oneself, appear* (AC 27.20); metaphorically, of God's intervention *give light, shine on* (LU 1.79); (2) passive *become known, be manifested, appear* (TI 2.11)

showing God's self to the world. In the hosts of angels which appeared to the shepherds, God was making an announcement. When the Star of Bethlehem appeared in the sky it also was an epiphany. It was more than a star which suddenly appeared. It was an announcement that reached people in distant lands. Matthew does not use *epiphanies* to describe the Star which appeared and guided the Magi, just as the appearance of the angel and host used a slightly different word with a common root for their appearance. It is clear that these are happenings initiated by God. It is also clear that there was a purpose for them. The Incarnation represents God's appearance in our midst. God sent a messenger to reveal God's appearance in our midst with the angels visit to the shepherds. The Star the Magi followed was God's revelation of this manifestation of God's self in Bethlehem. The Star's appearance revealed God's intrusion into the created world to those far beyond the Judean countryside. As we consider this passage we often focus on this Star which guided the Magi for such a large distance. We point out the far reaching nature of the revelation. We often also point out how they evidently failed to trust the Star completely since they took a detour to Jerusalem instead of going directly to Bethlehem. This detour had drastic effects and led to the flight to Egypt by the parents and child, as well as what Matthew relates as the slaughter of innocents. Several other points could be made from this aspect of the passage, but probably because I had the Titus passage and its commentary in mind, I thought about another word which is used very differently in Scripture than we use it today. We speak of the events which brought visitors to Bethlehem as revelations. From the title of the sermon you already know the Greek word I am thinking of: Apocalypse². In the Greek lexicon this word is defined as an action which uncovers, discloses or reveals...generally a disclosure of God's plan of redemption in which the final outcome is revealed. It is this Greek word which gives us the title by which the final book of the New Testament is known: Revelation. The use of the word in our culture has lost this association with the concept of God's control of events, especially of the events in what are called the end times. Books and movies have fostered this disassociation by their focus on catastrophic events and using apocalypse in their title. There are many images which can be taken from Scripture which depict the end times as times of judgment with disaster upon disaster happening. Not all of these images come from the Book of Revelation. The prophets Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah all had descriptions which fall into this category. However, in the current dictionary the association is "any event associated with the end of the world." That is quite a different understanding. That is an understanding which is rooted in fear and which promotes fear. That is an understanding that ignores God's control of events. Although Revelation has many images of violence within it, the visions which describe events which occur on the cosmic front, the outcome of those events is never in doubt. God controls the end and the end is a realm whose description resembles the images of the Garden of Eden where God resides in the center. We often think of the gospel descriptions of the visitors to the young Jesus as being

² [Fri] ἀποκάλυψις, εως, ἡ literally, as an action *uncovering, disclosing, revealing*; figuratively in the NT; (1) generally, of what God discloses or makes known *revelation, disclosure*, e.g. his plan of redemption (EP 3.3); (2) as an end-time event *revelation, appearing* (RO 2.5; 1P 1.7); (3) of particular forms of disclosure, as through vision (RV 1.1) and personal guidance (GA 2.2)

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revelations by God of what God was doing in the midst of humanity. It seems to me that by allowing the relationship to these two words—epiphany and apocalypse to be disassociated from God's actions we have lost an important understanding. With epiphany we have made it a more casual concept. With apocalypse we have created an image to frighten ourselves. In the first instance we lose the awe and wonder which the appearance of God in our midst should invoke. With apocalypse we lose the trust and confidence that no matter the disastrous looking happenings in our world, God is still in control. In the story of the nativity, in the accounts of those to whom the birth of the child was revealed, we have both epiphany and apocalypse. God chooses to appear to us, to manifest his self in our lives through the Holy Spirit. If we maintain the Greek understanding that both epiphany and apocalypse are God things, we have access to both through God's initiative to be present to us. Thanks be to God.