The Rev Dr Rebecca L. Kiser

ADDING THE EXCLUDED

Jan 2, 2022 Epiphany C

Today, in church-speak, is called “Epiphany,” an inbreaking, illuminating event, a sudden perception of a new & deep, essential reality, an intuitive grasp of something startling and insightful that changes everything. This coming of God in flesh is a massive change in perception of God’s nature, a new unveiling of what God is about with humanity… something that radically changes what we know of God’s dealings with humans. In Matthew’s gospel, this new light of understanding reaches out to ALL people, those of other countries, other traditions, other languages, other cultures; that this new light of understanding about God goes beyond the limits of God’s dealings with only the Jewish peoples, but embraces and changes the reality of all peoples. We see this as the bright light from a new revelation in Jesus, shown in the magi or wise ones from far countries, from non-Jewish cultures, who came to this new light as the gentiles of the med region came to follow Jesus’ path to God.

Although there may have been a literal bright comet or planetary conjunction at the time, Matthew’s deeper meaning has to do with the new religious epiphany, insight or light that began to spread to more & more of the world. By the time Matthew was writing, the journeys of Paul and Peter to the gentiles & the founding of gentile churches was already happening. Matthew and the other gospel writers were nailing down the teachings, words and acts of Jesus because the new believers needed a common text before everyone who had actually walked with Jesus died off. Already the churches were full of non-Jewish people, who didn’t know of God’s love for people and God’s presence with people to save them. So this new religious conviction and experience, this new light of faith, was an epiphany, a revelation, a bright new light to the minds and souls of people, leading many to turn to God. A new religious conviction was taking hold.

It's interesting to me that both Christmas and Easter use the imagery of new light to talk about the new message through Jesus that was enlightening the world. Christmas’ celebration was set to correspond to the winter solstice, the return of more literal daylight that was already observed in most cultures as a special time. Then the celebration of Jesus’ death and resurrection was also marked in our Christian practices as the time of a new light - the Easter vigil of the Sat night preceding Easter Sunday traditionally had the extinguishing of all light in our sanctuaries - to signify the death of Christ - and Resurrection Sunday was celebrated with new light being carried into the sanctuaries, marking the new creation, the new life of Christ. We still do the stripping of the church at the end of Holy Week, like Christ’s death - in more liturgical churches, the priest strikes a new light with stones, and the congregation circles the sanctuary from outside singing, “the light of Christ, thanks be to God” in ascending pitches, finally bringing that new light into the sanctuary at the dawn of Easter. So the imagery of new light is an element of the whole Christ story - both Christ’s birth, and then Christ’s resurrection. Christ’s whole existence, the whole event of God’s inbreaking into humanity, and especially the death and resurrection to a new life, is seen as a new insight into God, into life, into faith, into perception, into human experience. We cannot overstate how big a change Christianity was to the world of humanity, as it spread like wildfire across countries and cultures.

After a couple thousand years, however, it seems to me that the practice of a Christian faith has become pro forma, a shell of its former zeal and vitality, and we are noticing that the more recent generations are not being gripped by the deep truths of what was a life-changing faith back then. When I look around at my experiences, Christianity has become institutionalized, it’s stories weakened by a lackadaisical practice, and not a lot of differences show between Christians and otherwise good folks who are skeptics or agnostics about God. God has been blamed for wars, for hates and divisions between people; God has been used as a political means for gaining earthly power; God has been claimed as the basis for all kinds of prejudices and exclusions of certain peoples. In many ways, today’s churches are just another nice society to belong to, with meetings and presidents and treasurers and secretaries, doing nice things like any civic club, and made up of nice community folks who otherwise live much like anyone else. Is it any wonder that recent generations don’t see any real value in joining?

Christianity has lost its charge, its deep truths, its vitality and its ability to challenge - and my friends, I stand guilty with others of my generation & those before me, of going along with the flow of things and only now noticing what has been happening. I’m reminded of the last book of our New Testament, the Revelation of John of Patmos, where the church of Laodicea is critiqued because it is no longer hot or cold, but lukewarm; its like hot coffee that’s sat too long or iced coffee whose ice has melted and watered it down - John has God say that God will throw out the lukewarm and watered down. In my humble opinion, people aren’t being drawn to church because it’s become lukewarm and watered down; it’s salt has lost its savor; any of the other illustrations Jesus uses. Part of the capital-C Church just goes through the motions; other parts of the larger Church are stuck fighting over minutiae.

We no longer carry the message of all being welcome, as we exclude people for all kinds of reasons; we no longer carry the message of oneness of all peoples. We look to our own prosperity, so overlook the needy at our doorsteps, as the Rich Man overlooked Lazarus. We are divided and broken, & our infighting over dogma speaks louder than voices recognizing essential unity of all persons in God.

It’s difficult for us to comprehend how big an insight, an epiphany, the gospel of Christ was, these couple thousand years earlier, when Christianity is pretty much around the world and all around us, and pervading how a lot of people see the world. Christianity is waning in interest to these last centuries, as the way we’ve taught these religious insights seems to not speak to current generations. You may notice that I DIDN’T say these religious truths aren’t speaking to current generations, I said that the way we’ve come to teach and hold those insights aren’t speaking to the depth of the souls of current generations. In my humble observations of the way the recent believers teach and live the faith, there is a lot lacking - a lack of depth, a lack of conviction, a lack of application to life situations - Christian faith in a large way, according to me, has become a shell of its original meaning and impact, and a simple shell at that - an outward practice of habits that doesn’t touched souls. It is my fault, my responsibility, our fault, our responsibility, that this has happened - it has been so gradual over the past years that we’ve gone along with things and let it slip away. Faith is neither hot nor cold, just lukewarm, and like a blah cup of coffee, isn’t worth drinking.

Yes, I am discouraged at the state of Christianity, because I love its teachings, I consider its point of view to be so basic to living for God as to be essential to the literal salvation of the world - essential to the continuation of the human species and the existence of this planet. But not like it is lived now, with infighting and insistence on all these exclusions and hates and divisions, with the over-involvement of following empty forms and moralistic judgements that divide and exclude. We’ve lost the depth of these insights, this epiphany, that God is here, that God desires people to be restored to life and love, that we are Christ’s body, that the world is God’s home - a truth that needs to seep into our consciousness and our conscious living, a truth that works to bring health and wellness to all, to bring food and shelter and health for all as far as we can; a truth that tells us, in the words of the prophets, that humanity needs to care for least among us, and all creation, or we will perish. Christianity has the word that can save us - as persons, as a people, as a species, and as a habitat on earth. And as far as I can tell, it’s deepest message is essential. We’ve gotten all tied up in who is included, who is excluded, and for what, and how we organize, and how we dress, and what word we think are okay to use, and how we look, and how much we accumulate, and how much we have in the bank, and who’s winning in the power department - we’ve assimilated to the non-essentials that distract from faith, and quit thinking and pondering deeply about what it is that moves us in God.

It has come to me, as a person now richer in years of seeking to walk with God, that I need to repent of how I have lived and what I have counted as important - and let God begin to change me yet again into a new way of living in faith. I want to let that new light of Christ begin to seep into the old ways I’ve been living, the old concerns that have occupied my mind, the ways of acting that I've taken for granted. I feel that I, like many, have been too concerned with outer trappings - with outer security, with worry about money, with worry about having things, with worry about which political party is in charge; and not enough concern over my prayer life or my growth into the image of Christ; with not enough concern over showing love to excluded peoples, poor peoples, hurt and suffering peoples. It's all been surface concern, accepted ways of showing concern that don’t really impact or affect me. I’ve been drawn off into concerns about my health and retirement plans, and do I want to travel, and what supplement plans to I have for my health care, what kind of TV do I need and such things - than what I do need to be concerned about - like where God is drawing my soul, how my faults are being healed by the gospel, how I am encouraging faith in those around me, how I am continuing to be drawn into God’s life.

Well, that’s all quite personal; although in my way of doing theology, the personal is often transpersonal as well - that what God is speaking to me is also the word that needs to be shared, especially in terms of passion and devotion and spirituality. I certainly don’t want to accuse anyone personally in what I have said as critiques of the whole Capital-C Church, although I do hope to raise questions in ourselves about our own spiritual lives and practices, and hopefully seek what God may be calling us to as we witness to Christ in our living. AMEN.

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