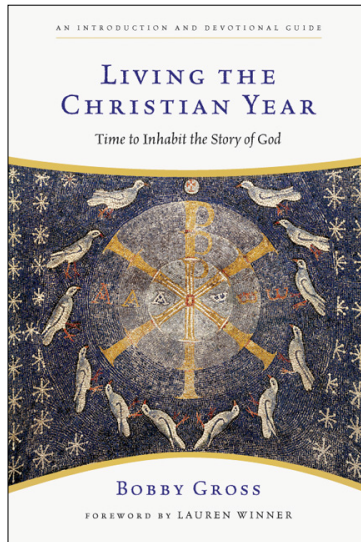


Epiphany

Enlightened
in the Telling



with 9 Weekly Devotions from
Living the Christian Year by Bobby Gross

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Tom J.

President, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA



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Epiphany

Enlightened in the Telling

I am the light of the world. . . . You are the light of the world.

JESUS

*We who have seen the light of Christ are obliged,
by the greatness of the grace that has been given us,
to make known the presence of the Savior to the ends of the earth . . .
not only by preaching the glad tidings of His coming;
but above all by revealing Him in our lives. . . .
Every day of our mortal lives must be His manifestation,
His divine Epiphany, in the world which He has created and redeemed.*

THOMAS MERTON

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

MARY OLIVER

I claimed a space in the line already meandering through Central Park one early July morning in 1999, grateful that my spot was shaded as we were headed toward 100 degrees for a second straight day. It would be a

few hours before the distribution of tickets for that night's Shakespeare in the Park production, *The Taming of the Shrew*. At dusk Charlene and I returned to the open-air theater for a raucous and, shall I say, warmly received evening of comical gender-clashing on stage. Around eleven, as we were driving home to our apartment in Washington Heights, I exited the Westside Highway at the George Washington Bridge as usual. But then I sensed that something was not quite right. What was it? I turned several corners and headed up Fort Washington Avenue, still vaguely unsettled.

Suddenly I saw it—or, rather, didn't see it. Except for the beams of a few oncoming headlights and those of my own car, there was no light. No humming streetlamps, no orange glow from the bridge, no fluorescent storefronts. And no traffic signals either, I noticed. Dead black.

As any urban dweller knows—and this is especially true in New York—it's never completely dark in the city. Moon or no moon, there is always some light, usually enough to read by. So this was eerie. Probably we found a parking place two blocks from home. We crept nervously down the sidewalk, hearing the voices of people we could not see. A waving flashlight here or there provided bearings enough to reach our building. Carefully we shuffled up the walkway to the lobby door and fumbled with our key. Inside we felt our way along the walls to our first-floor apartment, awkwardly let ourselves in, then groped our way to the pantry, finally finding candles and matches. In the small merciful glow we began to breathe easier, anxiety giving way to a sense of adventure.

The blackout persisted into the next day, affecting some two hundred thousand people in northern Manhattan. With the coming of daylight, hordes of people spilled out into the neighborhood sidewalks and parks. As the day wore on without power, folks grilled meat and shared food that would go bad in the rising heat. Radios blared, kids played in the fire hydrants and neighbors chatted in what amounted to a huge block party. The shared experience created a kind of camaraderie. Around five o'clock the power came back on and, with it, lights, refrigerators and air conditioners. Then everyone went back inside.

This experience became for me a kind of parable about how dark our darkness can be and, in contrast, what a relief when light is restored. The night without power was disorienting and dangerous; the coming of day-

light brought order and safety and even joy. To state the obvious spiritual point: without light, we cannot see.

During Advent and Christmas the metaphors of light and darkness infuse our spiritual reflections. In Advent we heard Isaiah cry out prophetically,

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. (Is 9:2)

During Christmas we joyfully celebrated the coming of that light in the birth of Jesus. Now the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6 brings this theme to culmination—the light of Christ made manifest to the whole world as symbolized by the Gentile Magi from the East. Thus the day of Epiphany and the season that follows complete what is sometimes called in the liturgical year the Cycle of Light.

THE HEART OF EPIPHANY

Three events in the life of Christ are associated with the Feast of the Epiphany: the visit of the wise men from the East, the baptism by John in the Jordan River and the turning of water into wine at Cana. The common theme is manifestation: what has been largely hidden is made more widely known. A star guides Gentiles to a future king, a voice identifies Jesus as the beloved Son and a set of wine-brimming pots reveals miraculous power. Epiphanies!

Epiphany comes from the Greek verb *phainein*, which means “to cause to appear” or “to bring to light.” The word can refer to the visible manifestation of a deity (also, in ancient writings, the arrival of a ruler honored like a god) or to an experience of sudden insight or revelation: those “aha” moments when we “see the light.” Churches in the Orthodox tradition use a slightly different word, *theophany*, which places even greater emphasis on the idea of *God* shining forth.

Epiphany is a season of enlightenment. In these five to nine weeks (depending on the date of Easter) that follow January 6, we focus our attention on Jesus and the unfolding manifestation of his glory “full of

grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). We watch him bring healing to the sick and desperate. We witness his confrontations with the powers of darkness. We listen as he teaches the eager crowds. We observe him patiently training his disciples. We behold him transfigured on the mountainside. We say, like those unnamed Greeks who seek him out during a festival, “We wish to see Jesus” (Jn 12:21). To which Jesus replies, as he often did, “Come and see” (Jn 1:39).

But later Jesus will also say to his followers, “Go and tell.” The one who summons us to himself sends us out on his behalf. The one who shows himself to us asks us to make him known to others. The one who declares, “I am the light of the world,” says to us, “You are the light of the world.”

On more than one occasion Jesus sends his followers out to various villages to heal the sick and preach the kingdom of God. When one group of seventy returns, full of joy and amazement, they can’t wait to tell Jesus what happened, how even the demons had submitted to them. Jesus rejoices with them over the success of their mission but even more over what was revealed to them along the way. They have seen something firsthand and have been changed (Lk 10:1-24). They’ve experienced small epiphanies.

So it is for us. Epiphany is a season for seeing more of Christ’s glory by focusing on his life and mission. Simultaneously, it’s a time for making that glory better known to those around us. We bear witness to what we have seen and learned and experienced. Herein lies a spiritual paradox: not only do we say what we see, we also see as we say. Epiphany, then, is a time both to inhabit the Story and to tell the Story, for in the telling itself we are further enlightened.

EPIPHANY IN CHURCH AND CULTURAL TRADITION

The first indications of an Epiphany feast come from Alexandria in the early third century. Some scholars postulate that the celebration was inaugurated to counter the Egyptian festival for the birthday of Aion, god of time, which included the ceremonial drawing of water from the Nile. Some Egyptian legends even speak of springs whose water turned to

wine. So perhaps Alexandrian Christians wanted to proclaim Christ's baptism, in which the water is made sacred by *his* presence rather than he by its, and his miracle at Cana, in which he transforms water to wine by his own power. To this day in Orthodox churches the priest, besides performing baptisms on Holy Theophany, also conducts the great blessing of the waters, first sanctifying a supply of water for the church to use in the next year and often also leading a procession to bless the nearest body of water.

While the whole church settled on December 25 for the birth of Christ, the East and West varied as to when they celebrated subsequent events. Thus today the East includes the visit of the Magi in the nativity celebration and emphasizes Christ's baptism on January 6, while the West recognizes the Magi on January 6 and commemorates the baptism on the first Sunday afterward.

Epiphany is also known as the Feast of the Three Holy Kings, or Three Kings' Day, especially in Latin America. In Matthew's account, however, the Magi are neither numbered as three nor described as kings. It's the third-century theologian Origen who first speaks of three Magi, presumably extrapolating from the three gifts. The designation of the Magi as kings first occurs in the sixth century, as do the traditional names of Caspar (Gaspar), Melchior and Balthasar. In the eighth century the Venerable Bede, an English monastic scholar, proposed that the kings represented the three parts of the known world—Asia, Europe and Africa, respectively—and thus have the wise men often been depicted racially in art and verse.

One Epiphany tradition, the blessing of the homes using holy water and incense, has been practiced since the end of the Middle Ages. The letters *C*, *M* and *B* are usually traced on the doors as a reference to the names of the Magi, although Adolf Adam reports an alternative interpretation: the initials stand for *Christus mansionem benedicat*, or "May Christ bless the dwelling." Frederica Mathewes-Green describes the use of newly blessed water in her church on Epiphany: "The holy water represents baptism, and during the period between Theophany and Lent each year, every Orthodox home is to be visited by the priest and sprinkled with the water, carrying our baptism home."

The thinking about the weeks between Epiphany and Lent varies among churches. In the Roman Catholic and much of the Anglican tradition, the period after the Baptism of the Lord is designated as either Ordinary Time or simply the Season after Epiphany. In this approach, Ordinary Time falls into two blocks, the five to nine weeks after Epiphany and leading up to Lent, and the remaining twenty-five to twenty-nine weeks after Pentecost and leading up to Advent. But many Protestant churches regard the weeks after January 6 as the Season of Epiphany and continue to emphasize the manifestation of Christ to the world, which is the approach I have followed in this book.

How fitting then for the final Sunday of Epiphany, which immediately precedes Ash Wednesday, to be designated in the Revised Common Lectionary as Transfiguration Sunday. Thus two profound events in the life of Christ frame the season of Epiphany: his baptism in the river, during which the heavens open, the voice speaks and the Spirit descends, and his transfiguration on the mountain, during which the light dazzles, the prophets appear and the voice calls from the encompassing cloud. Scenes of glory and moments of revelation—epiphanies!

THE CHRIST STORY IN EPIPHANY

Who were the Magi and where did they come from? There are no definitive answers. Scholars surmise that they were astrologers, perhaps Zoroastrian, probably from Persia or Babylon or possibly Arabia. Whom these wise men represent, however, is fairly clear in Matthew's narrative: the Gentiles, which is to say, the nations of the world. The Magi receive and respond to a revelation from God through nature (a star or conjunction of planets), which is then augmented by revelation through the Hebrew Scriptures (cited by the priests and scribes). They complete a long pilgrimage to Bethlehem to pay homage to the newborn king. Light shines in the darkness.

By contrast, the Jewish ruler Herod the Great rejects this "good news" and, foiled by the dream-warned Magi, implements his ruthless extermination plan. This atrocity echoes the slaughtering of male babies at the time of Moses' birth, as recounted in Exodus 1. Darkness opposes the light.

Guided by a dream, Joseph flees with his family to Egypt and waits until they can return home in relative safety. These incidents reinforce the allusion to the Israelites' long sojourn in Egypt. The light is not overcome.

In this one story of the Magi, then, Matthew refers to the two greatest salvation episodes in the history of the Israelites: their exodus from slavery in Egypt and their return from exile in the East. The implication? The Messiah's redemption will extend throughout the world to all people, even to the historic enemies of Israel, even to their contemporary oppressor, Rome.

This same theme emerges in the encounter with Simeon and Anna in the temple (Lk 2:22-40). Joseph and Mary go to Jerusalem to fulfill two expectations of the law: the consecration of their firstborn son to the Lord (Ex 13) and the purification of Mary on the fortieth day after childbirth (Lev 12). Guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon finds them, blesses them and prophesies. Like a watchman who's finally spotted what he's long sought, or an aged man ready to die in peace, Simeon rejoices. His prayer, called the *Nunc Dimittis* (Latin for "Now you are dismissing [your servant]"), speaks of "seeing salvation," of "light for revelation to the Gentiles" and of "glory for the people Israel," all epiphany motifs. The elderly widow Anna, also a prophet, likewise shares in this temple epiphany. She sets an example for us by praising God and speaking about the child to all who share her longing for redemption.

Except for attention to the above episode on the Feast of the Presentation, February 2, the focus of Epiphany shifts to the adult Jesus and how his identity and purpose are gradually revealed to those who respond to him, beginning with his baptism. Other than the interesting episode of Jesus in the temple at age twelve (Lk 2:41-52), we are told nothing of his adolescent or young adult years. Nor are we told what his cousin John knew of him and his intentions. The public story begins when Jesus travels down from Galilee to the river region where John has been preaching repentance and baptizing for forgiveness. Jesus too enters the river and submits to baptism. But his baptism is unlike that of anyone else's.

As Jesus emerges from the water praying, three things happen: the heavens open to him, the Spirit descends on him and a voice reassures

him. It is an epiphany for Jesus and also for John, presumably, and possibly for the bystanders. And, yes, for us too. His baptism points to both his divinity and his humanity. We do not know how in the years before this encounter his self-awareness has taken shape or his sense of mission has come into focus. But surely this is a decisive moment for him, a moment of confirmation, encouragement, empowerment—although this would soon be tested in the desert. Witnessing this event convinces John that Jesus is the Son of God. Some in the crowd experience heightened hunger and openness, and they soon give up everything to follow Jesus. And for us, seeing Jesus identify with us in baptism opens the way for us to identify with him in our baptism—as sons and daughters of God, beloved, accepted and Spirit-bathed.

When Jesus returns from the wilderness, he begins to preach about the kingdom of God now at hand. He performs miracles that enact the kingdom and calls men and women to follow him for the sake of the kingdom. His ideas, actions, conversations and miracles all progressively reveal him as the leader of this kingdom. They manifest his authority and power. They show his wisdom and love. They bring to light his unique relationship with God.

Jesus befriends the poor, heals the sick, touches the “unclean,” defends the powerless, forgives the sinful, stills a storm, exorcises demons, raises a girl from death, feeds the hungry, makes the blind to see, and more. The people, amazed at his teaching and healing, flock to him—women and men, young and old, rich and poor, pious and pitiful—and he shepherds them with compassion. To them he shows himself a merciful king.

John refers to these manifestations as “signs.” He structures his Gospel around a series of seven such signs: turning water to wine at Cana, healing an official’s dying son, curing a long-term invalid, feeding five thousand, walking on water, giving sight to a man born blind and raising Lazarus from the dead. John intersperses these signs with a set of discourses in which Jesus both teaches about God and makes claims about himself. Jesus makes metaphorical statements that imply his divinity: I am the bread of life . . . the light of the world . . . the door . . . the good shepherd . . . the resurrection . . . the true vine . . . the way . . . the truth . . . the life. By his signs, his teachings and his claims, Jesus displays his

glory and discloses his identity. “These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” explains John at the end of his Gospel, “and that through believing you might have life in his name” (Jn 20:31).

But this does not become clear to his disciples right away, not even to the twelve. People follow Jesus with fascination and gratitude and rising hope. Those closest to him receive his most extensive instruction, share his public acclaim and risk the hostility of his opponents. Many of them harbor visions of his political messiahship and their place in the coming new order. Eventually Jesus calls the question: “Who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8:29). In an epiphanic moment, Peter blurts out the words “You are the Messiah”—and he is right, but he understands only partially. When Jesus begins to explain his destiny of suffering and death, Peter and the others cannot take it in.

Shortly thereafter Jesus takes Peter and the brothers John and James with him to a mountain. While praying there he is transfigured—face ablaze like the sun, clothes dazzling white—while Moses (representing the law) and Elijah (representing the prophets) “appear in glory” to talk with him about his imminent departure (literally “exodus”) (Lk 9:28-36). Peter and the others almost miss it because of drowsiness, but they do see and hardly know how to react. Peter makes a hasty and awkward proposal for prolonging the experience, but the enveloping cloud and terrifying voice silence them into a listening posture. Like Moses on Mount Sinai and Elijah on Mount Horeb, these three men experience their own epiphany: an immersion in light, an overshadowing presence, an encounter with glory.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the greatest Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, in his magisterial *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, explores the correlation between God’s glory and his beauty. He writes of the human encounter with beauty in words that seem apt for the encounter of the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration and, in one sense, the experience of Jesus himself:

Before the beautiful—no, not really before but within the beautiful—the whole person quivers. He not only “finds” the beautiful

moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it. . . . Such a person has been taken up wholesale into the reality of the beautiful and is now fully subordinate to it, determined by it, animated by it.

Paul says something like this in writing to the Corinthian church. He describes the freedom and opportunity given to each of us to gaze upon the face of Jesus Christ and be changed:

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18)

Whatever the unveiling on the mountain was like for Peter, John and James that day—"We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty," Peter would later write (2 Pet 1:16)—the greatest epiphany for them lay ahead: the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our reflections in Lent will move toward those climactic events. Meanwhile, in this season of seeing, our eyes are fixed on Jesus.

INHABITING EPIPHANY

We can inhabit Epiphany by responding to the twofold call of Jesus: come and see, and go and tell. Like the original disciples, we are "to be with him, and to be sent out" (Mk 3:14). Over these weeks, then, we give our attention to Christ's disarming invitation and to his challenging command.

Encountering Jesus. I have worked in campus ministry with InterVarsity for three decades. One of the best experiences we offer to students is the "Mark Study," which we sometimes call "Encountering Jesus." We want each participant to see Jesus with new eyes and to respond in faith. We facilitate this experience through communal Bible discovery using the "manuscript method."

Simply put, we print Mark's gospel double-spaced on 8-by-11-inch paper with no verse or chapter markings, no headings or explanatory notes, no red letters or gold edges. We sit around tables with nothing but

the text, a pile of colored markers, a few basic reference resources such as a Bible dictionary and atlas, and, most important, minds and hearts illumined by the same Spirit who superintended Mark's writing. We first study individually, marking our pages to track repeated words, trace themes, note connections, detect literary structure, make observations and jot down our questions. Then we discuss in our table groups. Finally, a teacher facilitates a community conversation about our discoveries, questions, interpretations and personal responses.

By immersing ourselves in Mark's telling of the story, session after session, we see Jesus afresh. Over and over he surprises us, just as he did his disciples. We find ourselves captivated or puzzled or even irked by the things he says. We find ourselves disturbed or delighted by the things he does—or doesn't do. Always we are compelled by the person of Jesus.

Here's my first suggestion for inhabiting Epiphany: immerse yourself once more in the story of Jesus. You could use the devotional material that follows or choose some other approach. For example, you could read an entire Gospel one or more times from start to finish, absorbing the full narrative sweep of Christ's remarkable life. Or you could select a handful of episodes to explore more thoroughly, spending, say, a week on each one, reading and rereading, placing yourself imaginatively within them, quietly meditating on them (an approach called *lectio divina*, or "divine reading").

Of course, we encounter Christ in other ways besides engaging with Scripture. We can commune with him in prayer, we can sense his presence when gathered in worship, we can know him in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread and we can receive his love in the community of believers. In all these ways and more, Jesus invites us during Epiphany to come and see anew.

Exhibiting Jesus. Before he was the apostle Peter, he was just an ordinary fisherman named Simon. He first meets Jesus through his brother Andrew. And maybe he's in on the wine miracle in Cana. But as Luke tells it, Simon definitely gets to know Jesus when he first preaches in Capernaum (Lk 4:31—5:11). After an eventful synagogue service, Simon has everyone over to his house for dinner, even though his mother-in-law

is sick with a fever. But Jesus heals her right there in the home. At dusk as the sabbath ends the whole town shows up at Simon's doorstep bringing the sick—the synagogue service had been quite an epiphany!—and Jesus lays hands on them for healing. Simon sees it all. He's thrilled, I imagine, to be associated with this amazing new rabbi. But his next experience with Jesus draws him in even deeper.

One day Jesus stands preaching on the shore of Lake Gennesaret as the crowd presses in. Simon sits nearby, cleaning his nets after a night of futile fishing. Jesus steps into Simon's beached boat and asks him to push out so as to create a floating pulpit. When he's done speaking Jesus proposes to Simon that they put out into deep water and try some fishing. Simon, tired and somewhat irritated by this request, reluctantly agrees. What does a preacher know about fishing? Soon he finds out. Struggling with the bulging nets, he calls to his partners for help. This moment reveals to him the power and authority of Jesus as well as his own smug sinfulness. But Jesus speaks kindly: "Don't be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Simon and the others decide on the spot to follow him, convinced he will empower them for a new kind of fishing. Jesus catches them in his "net" only to turn them loose with the gospel.

And so it is for us. Jesus draws us to himself and then enlists us in his mission. But how do we bring others into the light of the kingdom? Our lives can point to Christ in many ways—our care for neighbors, our integrity at work, our hospitality at home, our generosity with money, our service to the poor, our concern for justice, our practice of forgiveness, our joy in worship, our hope in suffering. All of these reveal something of Christ's presence in our lives. Jesus stressed two things when he first sent out the twelve: proclaim the kingdom and heal the sick (Lk 9:2). In other words, communicate the message to others and respond to their needs with compassion.

The idea of purposefully talking about Jesus with our friends and acquaintances makes many of us uneasy. We live in a cultural moment when religious zeal is suspect, spiritual beliefs are considered strictly personal, tolerance is paramount, and anything resembling proselytizing is off-limits. The image of catching people in our nets may not be the most helpful these days. Actually, we would do well to imitate Andrew

(Jn 1:40-42): he simply said what he knew about Jesus—what he had seen and heard and experienced—and invited his brother Simon to come and see for himself. Jesus was able to take it from there.

In Epiphany we renew our willingness to let the light of Christ within us shine to those around us. Uncover the lamp, as Jesus put it. We want to reflect the luminous beauty of God in Christ so that our friends turn and see the source for themselves. This requires equal measures of compassion and courage. But here's where Simon's lesson comes in: Jesus is fully able to make us able as his representatives.

Here are some practical steps you could take.

- Ask Jesus to increase your compassion for those who are far from God. Ask for greater courage to speak to them.
- Read a book to sharpen your thinking about sharing your faith.
- Choose a few friends or coworkers or family members to pray for during Epiphany.
- Become alert to openings in your everyday conversations where you can mention Jesus in a natural and interesting way.
- If someone seems open, suggest going for coffee and some conversation about spiritual matters—be prepared to really listen to their experiences, beliefs and questions.
- Invite a few folks to take a look at Jesus with you through a four-to-six-week informal, investigative Bible study.
- Propose to a few friends that they serve with you in a volunteer opportunity like Habitat for Humanity.
- Invite a neighbor to come to a social activity or worship gathering at your church.
- Give a friend a thoughtful book on Jesus or the Christian faith.

We let the light of Christ shine through us, verbally in our conversations and visibly in our actions. It's not our responsibility to generate the response, only to say and to show what we ourselves have been given to see. As Paul reminded his audience in Corinth:

Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus. . . . It started when God said, "Light up the darkness!" and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful. (2 Cor 4:5-6 *The Message*)

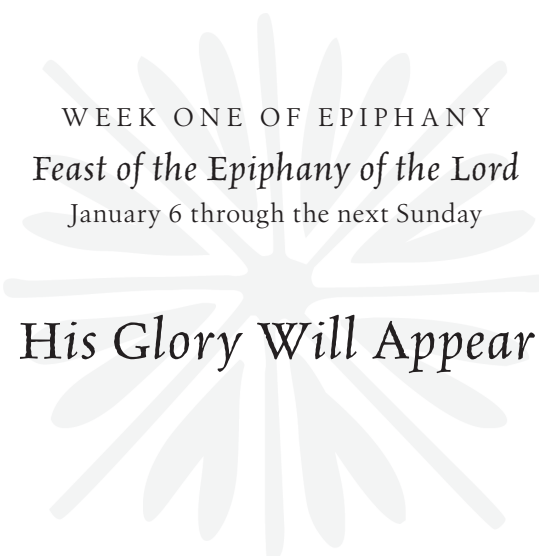
A GLIMPSE OF HIS GLORY

Epiphany makes us think about darkness and light. How easily I can become complacent about spiritual darkness. But then I read the paper and listen to the news. I think about the struggles and pain of the people I know. I look within my own heart and find plenty of darkness. So I am drawn back to Jesus, eager to see him anew, like the Magi at the crib and John in the Jordan and Mary at the wedding and Simon in the boat and the disciples on the mountain. And each of these set out to tell others what they had seen. Having encountered the light, they exhibited the light.

So too for us during the weeks of Epiphany. We focus our gaze on Jesus in order to glimpse his glory, his transfigured beauty and power, his embodied grace and truth. And what we are given to see, we gladly speak of to our friends that they might share with us the light of Christ.

* * *

Preview of devotions in Epiphany. With the Feast of the Epiphany, the days of Christmas end but the Cycle of Light continues as the identity and glory of the adult Jesus come to light over the ensuing weeks. The first set of devotions centers on the feast and covers the days up to the first Sunday. The second week focuses on the baptism of Jesus. The final week features his transfiguration. The weeks between highlight a progression of signs and miracles that reveal Jesus as the Christ. The Gospel texts come from Mark and John and do not reflect the lectionary. Because the length of Epiphany varies annually, it will be necessary in most years to skip some devotional units in order to conclude with the transfiguration (see week nine) just before Ash Wednesday.



WEEK ONE OF EPIPHANY
Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord
January 6 through the next Sunday

His Glory Will Appear

Isaiah prophesies a time when God will rise like the sun over Israel: his glory will appear and nations and kings will be drawn to the brightness of the light. The traditional texts for the Feast of the Epiphany explore this theme. Indeed, light is given to the kinglike Magi in the East who journey to Palestine to pay homage to a newborn king. Psalm 72 supplies words that can help us pay him homage ourselves. And Paul interprets the universality of this new kingdom. Christ came for people of every ethnicity and culture on the earth. He is the glory that appeared, revealing the wisdom and love of God; now God chooses to make this glory manifest through us, his church.

Approaching God. O Lord, may your name endure forever and your fame continue as long as the sun; may the people of every nation be blessed in you, and may they pronounce you blessed. Amen.

Presenting Myself. Like the Magi of old, O Father, I am overwhelmed with joy to enter the presence of Jesus, your incarnate Son, and like them I kneel before you this day to pay homage and to offer my gift, the gift of myself. Amen.

Inviting God's Presence. Let your light come, O Lord, let it shine on me this day; let your glory rise upon me like the sun appearing at dawn. Amen.

LISTENING TO GOD

**Matthew 2:1-12 (ABC); Isaiah 60 (ABC); Psalm 72 (ABC);
Ephesians 3:1-12 (ABC)**

Matthew recounts the story of the “wise men from the East.” It is likely that the visitors are seers or priests from Persia, or modern-day Iran. Tradition speaks of three men because the text identifies three gifts, which are generally taken to represent respectively his kingship, priesthood and sacrificial death. A God-given light guides the Magi to Jesus; a God-given dream steers them away from Herod and his despotic intrigues. What does this story mean for us? Certainly it points to Jesus as a universal Savior. Also it shows that Jesus deserves our gifts, the best of ourselves and of our cultures. To the foreign visitors—and to us—Jesus makes visible the glory of God.

Once more in our readings **Isaiah** sheds prophetic light on the gospel. The lectionary features Isaiah 60:1-6 for Epiphany, but the entire chapter celebrates the triumph of light over darkness. Again we can detect the multiple horizons of his poetry: the political, the messianic and the eternal. Isaiah envisions a time when the nations, as represented by their leaders, will be drawn to the transformed city of God and the redeemed community of his people. The light will draw them and they will bring the finest treasures of their cultures as gifts. Note yet again the hallmarks of this kingdom: peace, righteousness, salvation and praise. This pictures something far greater than the nationalistic triumph of the nation of Israel; this prophecy anticipates the visions of John’s Revelation. The visit of the Magi harkens back to Isaiah’s prophecy and prefigures the greater glory yet to be manifested. Take time today to bask in this vision of the day when the Lord will be our everlasting light and God will be our glory (Is 60:19).

Read **Psalm 72**, the appointed psalm for Epiphany, and mark its resonance with Isaiah 60 and Matthew 2. It is a prayer for a king, but it escalates into a vision beyond the political. Pray it with Jesus in mind. Picture not the conquest and political domination of other nations but the welcome of the world’s cultures into the community of God. The glory is for

everyone! Let this psalm shape your prayers in response to the world news that you read or hear this week.

Paul in his masterful letter to the **Ephesians** and other churches in Asia Minor lays out his theological perspective on Jesus. As a Jew, the great epiphany for him was that God intended the “promise in Christ Jesus” for Jew and Gentile alike. These far-apart peoples are now joined into one body, one community and one destiny. By an astounding plan, the “wisdom of God in its rich variety” is to be made manifest to the world through the church, and not only to the human world but to the spiritual “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” as well. We the people who bear the holy name of Christ are meant to show forth, to reveal, to make known the glory of God by our love for one another, our love for our neighbors and our loving proclamation of Jesus. With Paul we become servants of this gospel according to God’s gift of grace.

RESPONDING TO GOD

The Feast of the Epiphany and the ensuing days invite our continued worship and celebration of Jesus. We might want to continue using candles or lights a bit longer as a reminder of the light that has come, the glory that has risen on us. Begin thinking about the opportunities you may have over the coming weeks to reflect that light to those God has placed in your life. Epiphany inaugurates a season for discovering Jesus afresh and renewing our commitment to bear him witness.

Closing Prayer. Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of your people, who alone does wondrous things; blessed be your glorious name forever; may your glory fill the whole earth. Amen and amen.



WEEK TWO OF EPIPHANY
Beginning the first Sunday after January 6

The Baptism of the Lord

In each Gospel the story of the adult Jesus begins with a portrayal of John the Baptist, the eccentric prophet who shows up in the river environs of Judea proclaiming the kingdom of God, baptizing the repentant and paving the way for a new spiritual leader. Then Jesus comes and, surprisingly, asks to be baptized. But what happens to him as he emerges from the water is unique. Jesus does not confess sins to God; rather, God himself bears witness to Jesus: the voice from heaven confirms his identity and the Spirit from heaven tangibly descends. For Jesus it's an epiphany, and for the people a glimpse of glory! In focusing this week on the baptism of the Lord, this “anointing” of the Christ, we have an opportunity to rehearse our own baptismal identity as beloved children of God who have received his very Spirit.

Approaching God. You spoke, O Lord, over the deep at creation; you roared, God of Glory, in the waters of the flood; you thundered, Mighty God, from the clouds on the mountain: your voice, O Lord, is powerful, your voice is full of majesty; all your people cry “Glory!”

Presenting Myself. With the heavenly beings I ascribe to you, O Lord, glory and strength, I ascribe to you the glory of your name; before your holy splendor, O Lord, I worship you.

Inviting God's Presence. As you spoke to your beloved Son at his baptism, let me hear your voice this day; as the heavens opened to reveal your descending Spirit, open my eyes to your heavenly glory. Amen.

LISTENING TO GOD

Psalm 29 (ABC); Isaiah 42:1-9 (ABC);

Mark 1:1-11 (B); John 1:29-34 (A); Romans 8:14-17

The lectionary always assigns **Psalm 29** for the Sunday we celebrate Jesus' baptism, most obviously because of the common elements of voice and water. But look for deeper resonances as you meditate. The psalm opens with heavenly beings and closes with human beings, moving from glory in the highest to peace on earth. The middle part features creation, comparing a thunderstorm in its fierce progression to the majestic voice of God. We hear echoes of God's voice at creation, in the flood and perhaps on Mount Sinai. The God enthroned as king who creates and judges and redeems is the same one who speaks to Jesus at his baptism and who speaks also to us.

Isaiah prophesies a servant whom God will give as a covenant to all peoples, a light to all nations and a liberator to all prisoners of darkness. What we anticipated during Advent begins to be revealed in this season of Epiphany. God is doing a new thing! He upholds and presents his servant Jesus, his chosen one in whom he delights, on whom he puts his Spirit and through whom he will bring justice to the nations.

Read the account of Jesus' baptism in **Mark** or one of its parallels in the other Synoptic (meaning "through the same lens") Gospels (Mt 3:13-17 or Lk 3:15-22). With imagination put yourself in those crowds. Why does Jesus want to be baptized, given that he has no sins to confess? If nothing else, in humility Jesus fully identifies with the people and thereby with us. Pause and consider that Jesus is now well into adulthood; over some thirty years he has grown from toddler to boy to teenager to young man. He is part of a family, a member of a village and a product of a culture. He is fully human. Yet his experience at the river also tells us—and him—that he is not like us. What do you think the voice and the vision meant for Jesus at this beginning point in his public life? What might it mean for you as you identify with him?

Rather than describing the scene at the river, **John** in his Gospel emphasizes the Baptist's testimony afterward. How does John understand his role? With humility he reveals Jesus to his community; with forth-

rightness he testifies to what he has seen. And what does he say of Jesus? Take some time to meditate on the implied meanings of John's testimony: "the Lamb of God" (atonement), "He was before me" (preexistence), "The Spirit . . . remain[ed]" (empowerment), "the Son of God" (divinity). While John the Baptist fulfilled a unique calling, what can we learn from his example for our own roles as witnesses?

This excerpt from **Romans 8** helps us connect our experience with that of Jesus. When we identify ourselves fully with the one who identified with us, we receive the same Spirit that descended on him at his baptism. By that Spirit we've been adopted as sons and daughters of God. By that Spirit we may utter the intimate cry to God, "Abba! Father!" By the voice of that Spirit we are affirmed as deeply beloved by God.

RESPONDING TO GOD

Two questions can usefully guide us during this season of revelation. First, as we see Jesus anew, how are we moved to respond to him? Through imitation? obedience? worship? Second, how can we, like John the Baptist, bear witness to what we are seeing?

This is a good week to renew the meaning inherent in your own baptism: your humble repentance, your dying to sin and self, your opening to God's life-giving Spirit, and your public expression of allegiance to Jesus. Listen this week for the voice that assures you of God's love, and look for the Spirit that strengthens you to point out the Lamb to those around you.

Closing Prayer. Heavenly Father—Abba, Papa—thank you for the assurance of your Spirit; thank you for embracing me as your beloved son/daughter; thank you for the grace of your approval in Jesus, my baptized Lord. Amen.



WEEK THREE OF EPIPHANY
Beginning the Sunday between January 14 and 20

Come and See

After his baptism and his temptation in the desert, Jesus comes to Galilee proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God has come near. Soon he begins to call men and women to follow him. Come and see, he says, and when they do they witness Jesus teaching with authority and doing extraordinary things. The first of these manifestations takes place when Jesus turns some one hundred gallons of water into good wine for a wedding feast. By this and other signs Jesus begins revealing his glory, and the nascent disciples see and believe. Likewise during this season, as we see Jesus afresh in the Gospels of Mark and John, our belief will be strengthened, our desire to follow him will deepen, and our eagerness to tell about him will grow.

Approaching God. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may feast on the abundance of your house and drink from your river of delights, for with you is the fountain of life and in your light we see light.

Presenting Myself. Lord Jesus, Teacher, today I want to come and see what you are doing and hear what you are saying; and I will be quick this week to tell others what I am seeing and learning about you. Amen.

Inviting God's Presence. O continue your steadfast love to me and to all who know you; may we find refuge in the shadow of your wings and joy in your glorious presence. Amen.

LISTENING TO GOD

**Mark 1:14-34 (B); John 1:35-51 (AB);
John 2:1-11 (C); Psalm 36 (C); 1 John 1:1-5**

In **Mark 1**, note the condensed summary of Jesus' message: the ripening of time, the announced presence of the kingdom, the call to repent and the invitation to believe. The four fishermen respond to the seemingly abrupt call to join up with Jesus in a new vocation. (See Lk 5:1-11 for a more detailed account of how Jesus catches Simon.) Soon they see him in action in the Capernaum synagogue. Imagine yourself that day in the assembly, witnessing this public episode or in the house afterward as Jesus lifts up Simon's fevered mother-in-law. Then picture the scene after the sabbath sun sets as Jesus responds to the townsfolk with their procession of needs and tremors of amazement. What do you see?

John too tells how the first followers connect with Jesus. In **John 1:35-42**, two men spurred by John the Baptizer tentatively approach him. What do you make of their terse exchange? They spend the day with Jesus and Andrew is impressed enough to tell his brother that they'd found the Messiah. What does it mean that Jesus renames Simon on the spot? In **John 1:43-51**, two more become followers, but this time Jesus takes the initiative. Examine these encounters. What does Nathaniel conclude about Jesus? Notice how his declaration of faith prompts Jesus to reveal more of himself to him. Jesus depicts himself as the locus for the meeting of heaven and earth. What do we learn from this passage about the Epiphany themes of seeing and telling?

John 2:1-11 tells how three days later these new disciples go with Jesus and his family to Cana where, as John puts it, they witness their first sign that reveals his glory: turning water to wine. And they believe in him. Why this for his first miracle? If nothing else, it affirms Jesus' humanity—he revels with friends at a wedding—and underscores the earthly goodness of creation—wine to gladden the heart! What is Mary's role in this episode? What do you make of her exchange with Jesus? Put yourself in the shoes of other participants: the servants, the banquet master, the bridegroom, the disciples. This extravagant, gracious gesture foreshadows a greater glory—

a messianic abundance—yet to be revealed.

Psalm 36, with its picture of delightful feasting and drinking in verse 8, resonates with the Cana story; we find the overall theme of Epiphany in verse 9: “In your light we see light.” Read the full psalm to put these verses in context. In the first part David characterizes the wicked. In the middle part he celebrates the grace of God: steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and justice. Notice the metaphors that amplify these attributes. In the final part David puts his trust in God’s saving grace.

The preface of **1 John** interlaces the themes we explore during Epiphany: revelation (seeing) and testimony (saying), light and life, time and eternity. Trace how John relates these themes to one another. Why does John bear witness in his writing?

RESPONDING TO GOD

Jesus reveals his glory—his authority and power and love—in the place of worship, yes, but also inside a home, out in a front yard, down by the riverside and in the midst of a wedding. It’s in these everyday contexts that he invites belief, at least enough to begin following him. This week come and see even more, and then tell somebody else.

Closing Prayer. Open my eyes, O God, that I might see more of your glory as revealed in your Son, and soften my heart that I might trust more deeply in the fullness of your grace and truth. Amen.



WEEK FOUR OF EPIPHANY

Beginning the Sunday
between January 21 and 27

Be Made Clean

The connection between sickness and sin—hence between healing and forgiveness—is elusive. Upon passing a blind man one day Jesus’ followers ask him about this connection, and Jesus makes clear that the man’s physical affliction did not result from any moral failing (Jn 9:1-3). Yet on another occasion Jesus heals a man and then warns him to sin no more, lest something worse befall him (Jn 5:14). The readings for this week portray Jesus healing various infirmities in various ways, and they also include the next two of John’s seven signs. These stories show Jesus’ concern for the whole person: physical suffering, spiritual guilt, emotional shame and social alienation. Jesus heals, forgives, cleanses and restores. All of this is encompassed when he says, “Be made clean.” This week let Jesus reveal to you anew his compassion and power to bring healing and forgiveness in response to your humility and faith.

Approaching God. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me; bless his holy name. You have established your throne in the heavens, O Lord, and your kingdom rules over all. You are merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; you will not always accuse, nor will you keep your anger forever.

Presenting Myself. Have compassion for me, O Lord, as a father has compassion for his children; for you know, O Lord, how I am made, you remember that I am dust.

Inviting God's Presence. I bless you, O Lord, as the one who forgives all my iniquity and heals all my diseases, who redeems my life from the pit and crowns me with steadfast love and mercy. Amen.

LISTENING TO GOD

Psalm 103 (B); **Mark 1:40-45**; **Mark 2:1-12 (B)**;
2 Kings 5:1-19a (B); John 4:46-54; **John 5:1-18**

Psalm 103 bids us to rouse our souls into thanksgiving and praise. David guides us through a litany of reasons to bless the Lord, first among them our forgiveness and healing. God is generous with his acts of redemption, as we see in the stories of Israel and the church and our own lives. Consider reading this psalm during each of your times of reflection this week. With David rehearse what you know of God's character: his eternal love compared to our mortality, his forgiving mercy in light of our moral shortfall and his compassion to heal given our frailty. Recount the benefits you personally have received from him. Then bless him!

In reading **Mark 1**, recall that lepers were considered unclean. This designation conveyed far more than an indication of infection and quarantine. Such a person also came under moral suspicion and social stigma; he or she was forced to live "outside the camp" (see Lev 13—14). So Jesus risks his own "cleanness" when he reaches out in pity to touch the beseeching leper. He chooses to heal and he also chooses to physically embrace. Jesus makes him clean again, which is also why he insists that the man go through the formal process of reincorporation into the community as clean (see Lev 14). Can you identify with this leper in any way?

The next episode, in **Mark 2**, carries drama. Take time to imagine the scene from the different standpoints: first as a bystander crowded into the house, then as one of the four friends taking initiative, then as the paralyzed man placed, perhaps reluctantly, at center stage, and finally as Jesus, who surprises everyone with his response. It is easier, of course, to say to someone, "Your sins are forgiven," as this cannot be proved; to declare someone healed is another matter. Thus when Jesus accomplishes the healing, he confirms his authority to forgive as well. This week, whom can you "carry" to Jesus in prayer? Do you need to let friends carry you? And

if you were set before Jesus today, what might he say to you?

2 Kings 5:1-19a is an interesting story of healing in the Old Testament. What parallels do you find with the episodes from Mark? Whose gracious initiative leads to this miracle? God generously heals a foreign military leader. Naaman believes and God is glorified. How does this story speak to you?

John 4:46-54 records Jesus' second sign. A father intercedes for his dying child and, amazingly, Jesus heals at a distance. John highlights the man's belief. The pleading father is not interested in a sign as such, only that his son will live. And Jesus cared not that the man worked for hated Herod.

In **John 5** we get the third sign. This time it is Jesus who takes the initiative, approaching a man who's been disabled for thirty-eight years. Why do you suppose Jesus asks if he wants to be made well? Jesus commands the man in faith to get up. He does! Notice how the man is buffeted afterward by sabbath fanatics. But Jesus finds him and offers reassurance; he also calls him to a grateful repentance (but surprisingly he turns around and betrays Jesus). Notice that John says nothing of anyone else at the Beth-zatha Pool being healed.

RESPONDING TO GOD

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus heals many but not all. The healing miracles demonstrate the in-breaking of the kingdom of God and reveal the glory of Jesus. It is the same for us. If you are suffering from physical or emotional affliction, dare to present yourself (or family members or friends) to God in faith, asking for healing. Ask too for the fortitude and grace needed to bear the suffering if it is not alleviated. But if healing is an intermittent sign of the kingdom, you can be sure of this: God's forgiveness is always available, and this too is foretaste of future glory.

Closing Prayer. Touch me, dear Jesus, and make me clean; heal me and forgive my sins so that my life will be a sign of your kingdom. Amen.



WEEK FIVE OF EPIPHANY

Beginning the Sunday between January 28 and February 3

(If the last Sunday of Epiphany, use week nine.)

Bread for the Hungry

The psalmist acknowledges God as the source of wine to gladden the heart and bread to strengthen it (Ps 104:15). Jesus implicitly reveals himself as God in the miracles of turning water to wine for the guests in Cana and multiplying loaves and fishes for the multitude in the countryside. These signs manifest his glory and show his compassion. Jesus provides bread for the hungry, as Moses did in the wilderness and Elisha did in the time of famine. But even more than food for physical sustenance, people hunger for that which brings eternal life. Jesus offers himself as the bread of life. This week we meditate on this true food and true drink by which we may live forever.

Approaching God. Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed with honor and majesty and wrapped in light like a garment. O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures—we all look to you to give us our food in due season; when you open your hand, we are filled with good things. Amen.

Presenting Myself. O Jesus, I am hungry not for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which only you can give.

Inviting God's Presence. O Jesus, feed me today with the bread of life, feed me with yourself. Amen.

LISTENING TO GOD

Psalm 104; 2 Kings 4:42-44;

Mark 6:30-44; John 6:1-15; John 6:22-59

Psalm 104 celebrates God's greatness as Creator and his goodness as sustainer of creation. We can read it as a companion poem to last week's Psalm 103—note the identical phrases that begin and end both. An interesting exercise: correlate the poetic progression in Psalm 104 to the days of creation in Genesis 1. But the relevance of this psalm to our Epiphany theme for this week is found in verses 14-30, where God is praised for providing for his creatures: he gives food to the wild animals and he enables humans to cultivate the earth (grapes, olives and grain to make wine, oil and bread). In his providence God feeds us; by his breath/spirit he sustains us and all life. So with the psalmist we sing praise to our God while we have being.

In **2 Kings 4:42-44** we find a little-known episode about feeding a sizeable group of people with a handful of loaves, an account that anticipates the feeding of the huge crowds of four and five thousand by Jesus. Pay attention to the elements of this story: an anonymous donor, a compassionate inclination, a skeptical servant, a confident prophet and a surprising outcome! Watch for these elements in the Gospel accounts of the feeding miracle.

In **Mark's** telling of the feeding of the five thousand, he is probably alluding to God's provision of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex 16). He stresses the deserted setting and describes the people as shepherdless sheep (Num 27:15-17). Jesus intends to take his disciples away for some rest and review after their return from a preaching mission, but the crowds track them down. How does Jesus respond to this interruption? How do you suppose the disciples feel? What do you make of their concern in verses 35-36? Perhaps Jesus is calling their bluff here. Put yourself in the disciples' shoes for the rest of the episode. What new insight about Jesus do they gain? What do we learn? (For Jesus' later feeding of four thousand, see Mk 8:1-10.)

In **John's** Gospel, the feeding of the five thousand stands as the fourth

“sign” of Jesus’ glory. Compare John 6:1-15 with Mark’s account. Here Jesus takes the initiative. He tests Philip. Does Philip pass the test? Knowing about Jesus’ first miracle at Cana, how might Philip have answered differently? Here the people see the feeding as a sign and conclude that Jesus is the prophet of whom Moses spoke (Deut 18:15), but Jesus resists their impromptu acclamation. Yes, this sign does reveal Jesus as a prophet like Moses, as Jesus earlier had implied (Jn 5:46), and more than a prophet.

Continuing in **John 6:22-59** (and postponing verses 16-21 to week six), we encounter a “difficult” teaching discourse. Enthralled by the feeding miracle, the crowds look for Jesus. He challenges them to see what the sign pointed to, namely something beyond physical food. Thus this discourse focuses on true bread and eternal life. Read it carefully. Jesus presents himself enigmatically as the bread of life. Pay attention to the relationship between Jesus and the Father, the interplay of God’s initiative and human belief, and the mysterious linkage between bread and wine and Jesus’ body and blood. Perhaps the Eucharist is also in view here. Meditate on the connection between the provision of manna in the wilderness (Ex 16), the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus’ giving of his flesh for the life of the world. Here is an epiphany: Jesus is the living bread that came down from heaven; if we take him into ourselves by believing, he takes us into himself and gives us eternal life.

RESPONDING TO GOD

This week, remembering that your Creator sustains you, be thankful for what you have to eat and your ability to secure it. Even more, especially if you are able to participate in the Eucharist or Communion, be thankful for the bread of life that sustains you eternally.

Closing Prayer. O Jesus, feed me with yourself today so that I may abide in you and you in me, for your flesh is true food and your blood is true drink. Amen.



WEEK SIX OF EPIPHANY

Beginning the Sunday between February 4 and 10

(If the last Sunday of Epiphany, use week nine.)

Peace! Be Still!

Last week we watched Jesus miraculously multiply the physical substance of food and discerned significant implications for our souls. This week we focus on two more of his nature miracles and their spiritual meaning: Jesus stills a storm and Jesus walks on water. These divine “interventions” in the created order recall the parting of the Red Sea in the exodus and anticipate our future delivery from the chaotic powers of evil in the eschaton. Indeed, the story of the demon-possessed tomb-dweller in Mark 5 amounts to a stunning real-life parable of our salvation by the redeeming power of Jesus. Psalm 107 provides a fitting antiphonal prayer in light of these gospel epiphanies in which Jesus commands the forces of destruction: Peace! Be still!

Approaching God. I give thanks to you, O Lord, for you are good and your steadfast love endures forever; you redeem us from trouble and gather us to yourself.

Presenting Myself. Sometimes I am lost and bewildered, sometimes I feel trapped and burdened, sometimes I lie sick and sorrowful, and sometimes I just feel overwhelmed; in all such times, O Lord, I cry to you in my trouble and trust you to save me from distress.

Inviting God’s Presence. Come and be present with me today, O Lord; make the raging storm be still, hush the waves around me; bring me in peace to the haven I desire. Amen.

LISTENING TO GOD

Psalm 107; Exodus 14; **Mark 4:35-41**;
Mark 5:1-20; **John 6:16-21**

Read through **Psalm 107** once or twice in order to detect the structure. The opening verses set the theme: thankfulness for God's redemptive acts that show his unchanging love. From verse 4 we may surmise a reference to Israel's return from exile. Then come four stanzas with the same pattern: predicament, redemption, call to gratitude, closing thought. The predicaments—lostness, imprisonment, (moral) sickness and storm-tossed seas—may be ways of describing the exile or simply universal parables of the human condition. Can you identify with any of them? The last section (verses 33-42) reflects on the reversals in our human experience that God brings about by his judgment and grace.

In **Exodus 14**, we're presented with the dramatic event in which God through Moses parts the Red Sea so that the Israelites can escape the pursuing Egyptians. Then at God's command Moses releases the walls of water to crash down on the charioteers. Put yourself in the place of the people trapped between the uncrossable Red Sea and the unstoppable Egyptian army. What do they feel and think? Then what do they learn about Yahweh, their God and deliverer? After this epiphany the people, full of awe, believe in the Lord and trust in Moses as their leader.

In **Mark 4**, Jesus and his group are caught in a fierce storm at sea. How bad is the storm? Pretty bad, if experienced fishermen are scared. How curious that Jesus would be soundly asleep in the boat. Roused, Jesus rebukes the wind and waves—and also the disciples. How fair is it to expect them to have enough faith to stay calm during such a storm? Whatever they may have failed to grasp before this point, what do they now understand about Jesus as a result of this epiphany? Perhaps they begin to connect their experience to the Red Sea story or various psalms. Indeed, for an apt reflection on this episode, reread Psalm 107:23-31. Do these texts speak to your life in any way right now?

Mark 5:1-20 gives us the dramatic story of the Garasene demoniac. First, pay attention to all the details in Mark's portrayal of the tormented

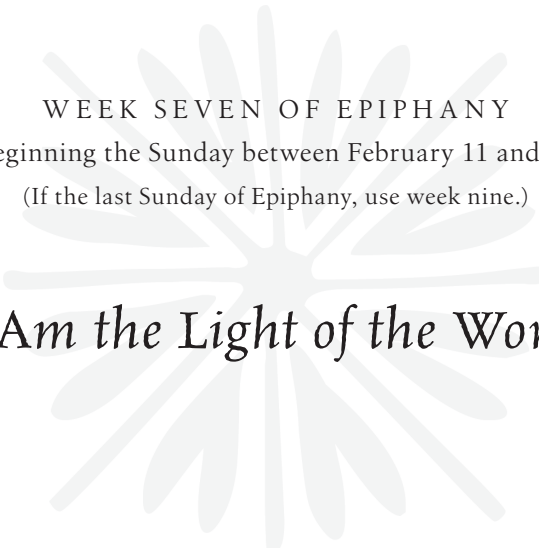
man. What do they say about his condition and, symbolically, about the human condition? Next, study the strange encounter between Jesus and the demon-possessed man. Ironically, it's the demons that reveal Jesus' identity and recognize his authority. Then picture the scene after the man is healed, using your emotions as well as your mind. Finally, consider the surprising reaction of the (probably Gentile) townsfolk. Jesus refuses the man's request to go with him and instead commissions him to become a witness to the very community that's so afraid of him. Here is the Epiphany pattern: transforming encounter, bold proclamation. Mark places the casting out of the demons right after the stilling of the storm; do you see a connection? Again, Psalm 107 can provide a fitting meditation on this redemptive action by Jesus.

We return to **John 6** and the fifth sign revealing Christ's glory, another nature miracle: Jesus walks on water. John mentions strong wind, but the parallel accounts (Mt 14:22-33; Mk 6:45-52) make clear that the disciples are struggling, and Jesus comes to help. How do they react? Jesus identifies himself to put them at ease—"Don't worry; it's me"—and also to imply his divine identity—"I am, but don't be afraid." Matthew and Mark report the calming of the wind once Jesus gets into the boat; Matthew alone tells about Peter walking on the water. John suggests a further miracle in the speed of reaching at their destination (see Ps 107:30). With echoes of the Red Sea crossing, Jesus demonstrates a creator-like authority over nature and a redeemer-like power to save.

RESPONDING TO GOD

The Scriptures this week speak of God's power and predisposition to rescue us when we're in trouble. Do any of the stories fit your situation just now: trapped with no way out, caught in a storm that could sink you, tormented by forces beyond your control or facing a headwind that makes progress seem impossible? Let the epiphanies of these passages renew your confidence in Jesus.

Closing Prayer. I thank you, O Lord, for your steadfast love and for all your wonderful works to humankind; I will extol you in the congregation of your people and proclaim you to all those around me. Amen.



WEEK SEVEN OF EPIPHANY
Beginning the Sunday between February 11 and 17
(If the last Sunday of Epiphany, use week nine.)

I Am the Light of the World

Light is a universal spiritual metaphor. Many teachers offer their wisdom as a source of enlightenment. But in the same way that Jesus' healing once ratified his authority to forgive sins (Mk 2), his restoring of physical sight validates his claim "I am the light of the world." This week we examine several episodes in which Jesus heals people who are blind. More importantly, we think about the issue of spiritual blindness. If we cannot admit the possibility of our own blindness, how can we gain—or regain—sight? Of course, this is what the season of Epiphany elucidates: our need for eye-opening encounters with Christ.

Approaching God. Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world; whoever follows you will never walk in darkness but have the light of life.

Presenting Myself. I confess that at times I am blind to your light and I walk in darkness, but today, Lord Jesus, I desire to walk in the light and have fellowship with you. Amen.

Inviting God's Presence. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. Open my eyes that I may see your light. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.

LISTENING TO GOD

**Mark 10:46-52; John 8:12-20; John 9;
1 John 1:5-10; Psalm 146**

The healing in **Mark** of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, is the second restoring of sight miracle in the Gospel (the other occurs in 8:22-26). Put yourself in the shoes of Bartimaeus. You hear the excited wave of conversation as Jesus approaches on the road. What do you feel? What do you do? They tell you to shut up, but you shout even louder. You make a scene. Suddenly they are calling for you. It's him, his voice. He asks you a simple question. Dare you say what you want? Dare you hope in this Jesus?

In **John 8**, Jesus is participating in the Feast of Tabernacles (Succoth) in Jerusalem. He uses aspects of the festival to dramatize his identity and mission. For example, in John 7:37-39, in keeping with the daily water procession, he compares himself to a river of living water. Now, with implicit reference to the evening lamp-lighting ceremony in the temple court, he declares himself the "light of the world." To follow Jesus is to walk in light, to have life. An argument with the Pharisees ensues, which only shows that they cannot see the light.

What seems to precipitate the miracle in **John 9**, the sixth sign of John's gospel? Take some time to ponder Jesus' surprising answer to the disciples' question. In this case, in contrast to the two incidents in Mark above, Jesus takes the initiative. He sends the man to a pool called "Sent," where he regains his sight. After his life-changing encounter with Jesus, the man becomes a stalwart exhibit for Jesus' healing power. But the authorities refuse to see it. What's their problem? Everyone seems to be against him. And why is Jesus out of sight during all of this? Finally, Jesus comes looking for the man and in a poignant exchange, he reveals himself and invites belief; indeed, he accepts the man's worship. Reflect on the paradoxical judgment of Jesus; he is the light that both brings sight and causes blindness. And you? What do you see?

The epistle of **1 John** makes metaphorical use of light and darkness, the same themes we've been exploring during Epiphany. God is pure light. To walk with God is to walk in the light and to walk in the light,

John insists, is to love one another. But what about the darkness in our hearts and in our relationships? Jesus can bring light to these places if we will admit our wrongdoings and own our moral weaknesses. If we confess our sins, he will forgive and cleanse us. But if like the Pharisees in John 9 we deny our sinfulness, we will remain in darkness as if blind. What do you need to confess and who do you need to concretely love this week, so as to walk in Christ's light?

Psalm 146 is one of the five Hallel songs that conclude the Psalter, so named because each begins and ends with *Hallelu Yah*, or "Praise the Lord." And this is a fitting psalm to rehearse in prayer as the final week of Epiphany approaches. How easy to imagine healed Bartimaeus or the formerly blind man of John 9 voicing the opening of this psalm: an exuberant vow to praise God always. You may want to memorize verses 5-6 as a beatitude that reminds you where to look for help and in whom to put your hope. The catalogue of God's gracious actions in verses 7-9 recalls the various signs that have revealed to us the light and love of Christ during Epiphany.

RESPONDING TO GOD

The season of Epiphany is about seeing and saying. The Pharisees in John 9 claim that they are not blind, but of course they cannot see that they cannot see. This week, admit the likelihood that you too have blind spots, and humbly ask God to open your eyes to more of the light of Christ. And whatever he allows you to see this week, be willing to tell someone about it.

Closing Prayer. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! You, Lord God, made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them; you keep faith forever; you set the prisoners free and open the eyes of the blind. I will praise you O Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to you all my life long. Amen.



WEEK EIGHT OF EPIPHANY

Beginning the Sunday between February 18 and 24

(If the last Sunday of Epiphany, use week nine.)

Who Do You Say That I Am?

During Epiphany we have walked alongside Jesus' disciples as they listened to his kingdom teachings, pondered his subtle claims about himself, observed his exchanges with admirers and critics, and witnessed his amazing progression of miracles. To top it off, we now look at one of the three recorded occasions when Jesus raised someone from the dead (for the other two, see Lk 7 and Jn 11). What do all these words and works reveal about this itinerant rabbi from Nazareth? When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter blurts it out: "You are God's Messiah!" But are they ready to take in the next epiphany, the revelation of what this will mean? As John makes clear, even believers struggled to grasp Jesus' true identity and destiny. Of course, Jesus' question echoes down through time to us.

Approaching God. Praise the Lord! Great are your works, O Lord, full of honor and majesty, faithful and just; and great are your words, O Lord, trustworthy and established, faithful and upright. Your praise endures forever. Amen.

Presenting Myself. I want to be your follower, Lord Jesus; I want to live for more than my own self-fulfillment, even if it requires sacrifice and suffering; I believe by adhering to your word I will increasingly know the truth and the truth will make me free.

Inviting God's Presence. Lord Jesus, I need the help of your Spirit if I am truly to deny myself, take up my cross and follow you. Amen.

LISTENING TO GOD

2 Kings 4:8-37; **Mark 5:21-43; Mark 8:27-38;**
John 8:21-38; Psalm 111

The prophets Elijah and Elisha both perform miracles that anticipate those of Jesus. The intriguing story of Elisha and the Shunammite woman in **2 Kings 4** actually contains two miracles. Read the passage attentively, taking in the details and absorbing the drama. How would you describe the relationship between the prophet and this prosperous woman? How does she demonstrate her faith in God? How does Elisha show his faith? How does this story speak to you? Glance at 2 Kings 8:1-6 for an interesting follow-up to this story.

Two miracles intertwine in **Mark 5**, increasing the dramatic tension of the story. Rehearse the narrative three times, imagining in turn that you are Jairus, then the anonymous woman and then one of the three disciples. How do you experience Jesus? Compare the two miracles for similarities and differences. For example, both involve marginalized females (the woman unclean from her bleeding, the girl merely a girl), both emphasize the role of faith and both show Jesus' compassion. In one an adult with an incurable condition takes the initiative; in the other a man intercedes for his dying daughter. The woman has suffered from hemorrhages for as long as the girl has been alive. What about Jesus impresses you? Consider his compassion—how he listens to the woman, how he speaks to the girl (*talitha cum* means “rise, lamb”). Consider his power—how it goes out from him, how it even can raise the dead.

Jesus' question to his disciples in **Mark 8** culminates the first half of this Gospel. His followers have seen enough to draw a conclusion. Peter speaks up for the group (the parallel passage in Mt 16 makes clear that Peter's insight comes by revelation from the Father). Now Jesus begins to reveal that he will undergo suffering and death—and resurrection. What do you make of Peter's reaction and the fierce rebuke it evokes? Jesus spells out the implication of his destiny for them. It's not what they expect: deliberate self-denial, risk of capital punishment and forfeiture of independence. How could this be the path for the one anointed with power over nature, sickness, evil and even death? Yet in the paradox of

costly discipleship, Jesus promises life and alludes to a coming day of glory, judgment and sovereign power.

John also portrays Jesus telling his followers about his impending death. Just after declaring himself to be the light of the world, he speaks of “going away” to an inaccessible place. In the same breath he curiously asserts that his hearers will die in their sins apart from him. Try to understand Jesus’ meaning in this somewhat awkward dialogue. He describes himself as “from above,” he uses the “I am” expression in a way suggestive of divinity, he equates his words and actions with those of the Father, and he insists that adhering to his teachings brings enlightenment and freedom. Our response to these proclamations shows whether or not we are spiritually aligned with God.

Psalm 111 calls us to give wholehearted thanks to the Lord and to praise him publicly. It is an acrostic poem: each of its twenty-two lines begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first half of the psalm (verses 2-7a) highlights the works of God, and the second (verses 7b-10) his words. Perhaps these divisions correspond to the exodus and to the giving of the law, respectively. On this second to last week of Epiphany, this psalm invites us to study the power of Christ’s works and the wisdom of his teachings. As John 8 brings out, if we embrace Jesus’ words, we will know the truth and the truth will set us free.

RESPONDING TO GOD

Perhaps you could take some time this week to review the insights about Jesus that you’ve gained during these seven weeks of Epiphany. How have you observed his glory? What has he shown you through your devotions and your experiences? Joyfully reaffirm who you believe him to be and renew your willingness to follow him at all costs.

Closing Prayer. You sent redemption to your people in your Son Jesus; through him, you have commanded your covenant forever. Holy and awesome is your name. Amen.



WEEK NINE OF EPIPHANY

Transfiguration Sunday

Beginning the Sunday before Ash Wednesday

Transforming Glory

On the first Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany we focused on Jesus' baptism in the river; on this last Sunday we study Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain. Once again and even more dramatically we see his glory revealed and hear the confirming voice. For the disciples who experience this amazing and terrifying epiphany, it is transformative, as Peter's later testimony makes clear. Jesus' experience echoes that of Moses and Elijah in their day. This episode is a fitting culmination of the Epiphany season. As we have gazed each week at the face of Jesus in the Gospels of Mark and John, more and more of his glory has been unveiled. This final epiphany is dazzling, leaving us awed and speechless. Not only do we worship the majesty, we are changed by it; it is a transforming glory.

Approaching God. You are king, O Lord; let the peoples tremble! You sit enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! You are great, O Lord, and exalted over all. I praise your great and awesome name. You are holy, holy, holy!

Presenting Myself. You have placed a treasure—the knowledge of your glory in the face of Jesus—in the clay jar of my humanity so it will be clear that the extraordinary power belongs to you and does not come from me; I am humbly grateful, O Lord.

Inviting God's Presence. Shake me awake this day, O Lord, so that I may see your glory and hear your voice and be transformed. Amen.

LISTENING TO GOD

Psalm 99 (AC); Exodus 24:9-18; 34:29-35 (AC);

1 Kings 19:11-12; **Luke 9:28-36 (C);**

2 Peter 1:16-21 (A); **2 Corinthians 3:12-4:6 (BC)**

Psalm 99 prompts in us an echo of the threefold “Holy! Holy! Holy!” sung by the angelic beings before God’s throne (see Is 6; Rev 4). It helps us to celebrate God’s kingship, his love of justice and his merciful forgiveness. It reminds us that God answers those who pray, as he did the priests and prophets who called on him, especially Moses and Aaron, who encountered God at Mount Sinai (Ex 24), and Samuel, who first heard God’s voice as a boy (1 Sam 3). Let this psalm shape your personal worship this week.

The passages in **Exodus** describe Moses’ encounter with God’s glory on Mount Sinai, and the text in **1 Kings** tells of Elijah’s experience on Mount Horeb. These two towering figures will appear with Jesus in his transfiguring encounter with God on a mountain. Study each passage. What is Moses’ experience when he goes up? After he comes down? Have you ever been around someone whose encounters with God gave them, at least for a time, a kind of holy aura? Has something like this ever happened to you? Now compare the experience of Elijah with that of Moses. What is similar, what is different? Sometimes, maybe most times, God’s presence and glory are revealed to us in a “sheer silence” or “quiet whisper.” Might you find space this week to be still and silent and attentive to the voice of God?

Luke and the other two Synoptic Gospels record the transfiguration episode (see Mk 9:2-9; Mt 17:1-9) just after Jesus’ crucial exchange with his disciples about his messianic identity and destiny and his call to self-denial and potential martyrdom. What Peter, James and John experience a week later makes for a striking juxtaposition of suffering with glory. Reflect on the various details in Luke’s account. What is Jesus doing on the mountain? How does his appearance change? Why Moses and Elijah? (Law and prophets? Exodus and eschaton?) They speak about Jesus’ departure. Why does Peter blurt out a plan for organizing the experience? What do the cloud and voice remind you of? Why the com-

mand to listen? As always, put yourself in the story and see what you learn.

Later in life in **2 Peter 1**, the apostle Peter refers to his experience on the mountain. How does he describe it? What did it mean to him? For one thing, it bolstered his confidence in the prophetic messages of the Scripture: the writers were moved by the Holy Spirit and thus “spoke from God.” Peter’s eyewitness account of the glory likewise bolsters *our* confidence in the good news.

In **2 Corinthians** Paul weaves a tapestry of reflections on the theme of glory (chapters 3—5 form the larger context for our passage). He speaks of the relative glories of the old and new covenants. He refers to Moses and his shining face by way of analogy. He dramatizes the glory of the Lord as revealed in the face of Jesus. He declares that as we gaze at Jesus (as we’ve been doing during Epiphany) the Spirit is transforming us by degrees of glory into his image. And whatever suffering we endure, Paul reassures us, is slight and momentary when compared to the glory God has promised us, a glory that is weighty and eternal (2 Cor 4:16-18).

RESPONDING TO GOD

After reflecting on the transfiguration story and its related texts, step back at some point this week and allow yourself to meditate in this way: Could Jesus be inviting you to go with him to the mountain and enter into a posture of prayer and attentiveness so that he can reveal more of his glory to you, glory that will transform you over time?

Closing Prayer. O God, you spoke light out of darkness at creation and you have shone in my heart to give the light of the knowledge of your glory in the face of Jesus Christ; help me now to reflect this light in all that I say or do this day. Amen.

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