

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, January 17, 2010



An Epiphany Much Harder to See

a sermon by the Rev. Warren L. Pittman

Texts: Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Should you ever wonder what assures us that Jesus was an Episcopalian, beyond the fact that he quotes *The Book of Common Prayer* so often, you need go no further than the second chapter of the Gospel according to John.

Who but an Episcopalian would be told that a party was about to close down early and respond with such a practical and much-needed miracle as turning water into wine? (OK, at first he seems to hesitate, but obviously, at least, his *mother* was Episcopalian, since she's the one that make him do it!)

With this story we complete the traditional, *full* celebration of The Epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Although we usually think about The Epiphany as a one-day Feast, on January 6th each year completing the Christmas season, commemorating the coming of the wise men to Bethlehem "following yonder star," the older tradition, still followed in the eastern churches, retell *three* stories of Epiphany – meaning "appearance" – or *Theophany* – more specifically meaning "appearance of God."

The observance *starts* with the wise men, then moves to The Baptism of Jesus as "appearance" #2. This is the reason The Episcopal Church hears a story of Jesus' baptism each year on the Sunday after January 6th.

And then the Greeks, Syrians, Russians and the rest tell the story we just heard on this *Second* Sunday after the Epiphany, the story John the Evangelist tells us is Jesus' first "sign," the miracle at the Wedding of Cana. It is just in this third of the three-year cycle of Sunday readings, that the western church listens to the *whole* Epiphany story.

So The Epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ is a major feast that can span, when we let it, as much as fifteen days. And it is truly a Feast: it's all about *celebration*.

The wise men's story is told with only a hint of the shadow cast by King Herod; Jesus is left Jordan-side with the Spirit enfolding him and God's fatherly words about his beloved-ness ringing in our ears; and this first miracle is not at a sick woman's bedside, or a young man's graveside, but at a wedding party, offering the newlyweds what they need to keep the celebration going for at least as long as a hundred and twenty to a hundred and *eighty* gallons of earthy, fruity red jug table wine will let them.

To reinforce this near fortnight of celebration, the church reads with these Theophanies, these God-appearances, other scriptures filled with verses about joy, and abundance: Isaiah writes about "Delight" and nuptial rejoicing, the psalmsinger's lyrics are all about life, and light; and Saint Paul writes about the lavish generosity of the gifts God shares among the church's members.

It was the same last Sunday, and back on Epiphany Day, Wednesday before last. Light, joy, life, hope, love for all, and plenty to go around: all the stuff that makes me want when the Eucharistic Bread is broken to respond to the Alleluia declaration about Christ, the Passover sacrificed for us, with more than the reserved "Therefore let us keep the feast," but with the much more expressive Spanish, "*Celebremos la Fiesta! Alleluya!*"

Except today ... except today ... today as we hear yet more about the still inconceivable aftermath of what happened last Tuesday afternoon in Haiti.

A so far inestimable number of people died in a few brief moments, (earthquakes feel as though they last forever, but they don't) and the death toll is still rising among people cut off from what little aid is available.

There will be more death and compounded suffering from the malnutrition, disease and infection, that is to come; all in a place where an at-best fragile infrastructure to support a nation's common life and welfare has been destroyed.

It was around fifty years ago that the term "cognitive dissonance" began to be used in talking about human psychology and other social sciences.

What we are experiencing today is a theologically "cognitive dissonance" as we say and sing our alleluias, as we keep the feast and celebrate this *fiesta* even after five straight days of headlines and ever more detailed stories about what is happening just a few hundred miles southeast of Florida.

We listen to scriptures praising God's "appearance" and God's abundant love and grace, as more and more images of desolation and deprivation come up on our TVs and computer monitors.

I'd love to have a sermon up here that would turn this weekend of dissonance into a wonderful Afro-Caribbean sort of harmony, so that the ancient words and the front-page pictures matched up more easily, but I don't.

I'd love to tell and show you all, loud and clear, another Epiphany of Jesus, where it is that God "appears" in the midst of the wreckage and rubble, but right now I can't.

What sounds and looks so loud and clear in the old stories, seems often muted and clouded over time and circumstance.

Except ... except ... the faith I profess with you, the faith that celebrates a God who steps into human life in a simple human birth, a God who gathers Jordan-side with others to partake in a ritual of hope, a God who is there among the guests at a village wedding party, is, we believe, the same God who will "appear" – who will "*epiphanate*" (like Wonderland's White Knight, I like to invent words) who will "*epiphanate*" before a hungry crowd, in front of a blind beggar, beside an outcast woman, weeping at the mouth of a newly sealed tomb,

... and on a cross: a God who *is* present, even when that presence is so much less obvious than when enhanced by guiding starlight, or a descending dove, or gallons of flowing wine.

God *is* there in Haiti.

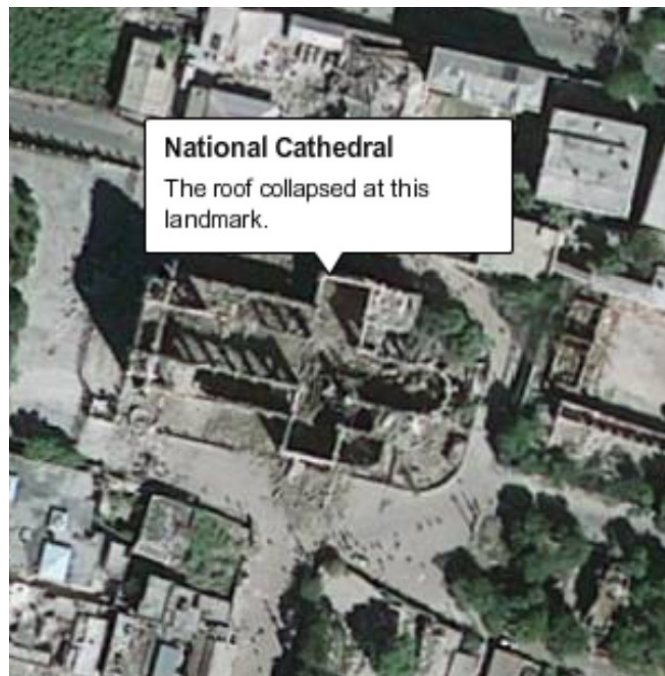
Exactly how has yet to be seen, but if *anywhere*, God is there, now, today; and believing that, there is the possibility of Epiphany. There are glimmers of light, and faint sounds barely able to be heard; in time there will be more.

But there has been one particular “appearance” that has offered me comfort and encouragement. In satellite photos of Port-au-Prince one can find on the internet, there was one that caught and has held my eye.

It has become an icon for me as I offer my prayers for the island’s people, and those who are offering their help.

In a pre-earthquake view of one section of the city, the traditional cruciform shape of the National Cathedral is visible. Sweeping the cursor across the screen shows a post-earthquake view of the same city blocks.

As with so much else, including the Episcopal Cathedral in the city, the earthquake left its mark. The National Cathedral roof is gone, and its surrounding buildings have been leveled, but the chancel, nave and transept walls still stand, now even more clearly than before, revealing the cross-shaped frame of the church there in the midst of the city.



Like the seal of God’s spirit in Holy Baptism, this “Epiphany: assures me that Haiti has been “signed” with the cross of Jesus, and “marked as Christ’s own, forever.”

AMEN.