

The Sunday Missive -- January 7, 2024
The First Sunday after the Epiphany

Hymn 132 When Christ's appearing was made known

When Christ's appearing was made known,
King Herod trembled for his throne;
But he who offers heav'nly birth
Seeks not the kingdoms of this earth.

The eastern sages saw from far
And followed on his guiding star;
By light their way to light they trod,
And by their gifts confessed their God.

Within the Jordan's sacred flood
The heav'nly Lamb in meekness stood
That he, of whom no sin was known,
Might cleanse his people from their own.

For this his glad epiphany
All glory unto Jesus be,
Whom with the Father we adore,
And Holy Ghost forevermore.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAqIV-UuR2I>

The Collect of the Day

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. **Amen.**

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Psalm 29

Ascribe to the Lord, you gods* ***Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.***

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due God's Name* ***Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.***

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters* ***The God of glory thunders***

The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice* ***The voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.***

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees* ***It breaks the cedars of Lebanon***

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf* ***And Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.***

The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire* ***The Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.***

The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe* ***And strips the forests bare.***

And in the temple of the Lord* ***All are crying, "Glory!"***

The Lord shall give strength to his people* ***The Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.***

Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— altogether there were about twelve of them.

LEVAS Hymn 120 There's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place

There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place,
And I know that it's the Spirit of the Lord;
There are sweet expressions on each face,
And I know they feel the presence of the Lord.

Sweet Holy Spirit, Sweet heavenly Dove,
Stay right here with us, filling us with Your love.
And for these blessings we lift our hearts in praise;
Without a doubt we'll know that we have been revived,
When we shall leave this place.

There are blessings you cannot receive
Till you know Him in His fullness and believe;
You're the one to profit when you say,
"I am going to walk with Jesus all the way."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9EGwkimNeQ>

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not

worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Sailing Downwind – Baptism of Jesus – Year B

“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading”, said Lao-Tzu, the great Chinese philosopher. “Over the decades, I could count on one hand the number of times there has been a big southwesterly wind event. It is seldom seen along the Central Coast. So, when we have strong southwesterly winds, the anomalous direction can cause havoc on our trees. Windswept trees along our coastline have developed an aerodynamic orientation leaning away from the prevailing northwesterly winds; when southwesterly winds develop, they are more likely to cause limbs to fall and trees to topple.” So says John, the meteorologist. Inflexibility can lead to breakage; and pride goeth before a fall. Or, as Mike, the Physical Therapist puts it, “Less movement means more stiffness in your joints. So, get up and get moving.”

When we hear the first words of Genesis, “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,” lots of us think we’re listening to a version of how all we see around us came to be, a ‘theory of everything,’ as the movie title has it. “The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, when a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Of course Genesis can also be considered as a history of human thought. In the beginning of our consciousness, the mind was a formless void and darkness covered the depths of our thinking. The wind of God came to get us up and moving in positive directions. God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw the light was good, separated the light from the darkness, and there was evening and morning: our first day.

But humanity continually veers from the course God has set, rebelling against the ways we know in our hearts to be good, and trying to sail or grow directly into the prevailing winds of

righteousness, that is to say, towards what our experience has proven to be disastrous. Despite the repeated advice, threats and outright disasters that prophets, philosophers and history itself have offered, the wind of God has yet to prevail; humanity's course is still very much an erratic one.

In Sinhala, the language of Sri Lanka, the word *sangsāra*, means "continuous flow," the repeating cycle of birth, life and death comprising our actions and their consequences in the past, present, and future. The concept is central to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism and Sikhism.

According to these religions, each person's current life is only one of many, stretching back before birth into past existences and reaching forward beyond death into future incarnations. During the course of each life the quality of our actions determines our further destiny. This is *karma*. The Buddha taught that there was no beginning to this cycle but that it can be ended through perceiving reality. The goal of life is to realize truth, the achievement of which, like the ripening of a fruit, is *moksha* or *Nirvana*, which is to say liberation, or enlightenment. Perceiving reality, we sail and grow with the prevailing wind of God, into the light.

The consequences of humanity's stubborn refusal to be driven downwind by God have been untold suffering, accompanied by unceasing attempts on God's part to turn us. Today's readings portray the relentlessness of God's energy and its availability to us, if only we will pay heed.

"The voice of the Lord thunders over mighty waters. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon, makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. God's voice flashes forth, but all do not cooperate; all do not pay heed. And so, God has gotten more involved. There are many traditions of God's becoming part of the human experience in order to influence and direct us more effectively. One example is the Sanskrit God *Avalokiteśvara*, whose name means "the Lord who looks down at the world," and can be either female or male.

One story tells of *Avalokiteśvara* vowing never to rest until she has freed all beings from the cycle of *sangsara*. This sounds familiar to

Christians. Despite strenuous effort, she realizes that many unhappy beings have yet to be enlightened. In the struggle to comprehend the needs of so many, her head splits into eleven pieces. [*Amitabha, the principle Buddha*](#), the boss, seeing her plight, gives her eleven heads, the better to hear the cries of the suffering. Upon hearing these cries, *Avalokiteśvara* attempts to reach out to all those who need aid, but finds that her two arms are insufficient to the task. Once more, *Amitabha* comes to her aid and invests her with a thousand arms with which to aid the suffering multitudes.

Our Christian story is very different in many ways, but also striking in its similarities. Jesus chose twelve Apostles to be his heads in the world, Judas failed, and then there were eleven. As for having a thousand arms to help, how many members has the body of Christ possessed, who toiled and fought and lived and died for the life they loved and knew?

Each of us is given the opportunity to be an arm of God. The Epiphany we celebrate is God's eager, insistent and present desire to have us take up that opportunity. The method God employs is to meet us halfway, by becoming part of humanity – no more and no less a human being than we are, in need of baptizing. That is why Jesus' life is significant. Otherwise it would be an anomaly – dramatic, but irrelevant. So what if Jesus forgave his oppressors, he already knew he was saved. But the closer he is to us, the more likely it is that we can follow him. That's why "in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And there came a voice came from heaven: "You are my child, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This is one of the few stories that appears in all four Gospels, and it's is not a new idea: In Isaiah Chapter 42, verse 1 we hear, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one..."

Paul asks the rhetorical question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit? Into what then were you baptized?" Each of us is a beloved child with whom God is well pleased. Each of us is equipped for ministry. Chosen means beloved and messiah means minister. Each of us has the power of Christ, the opportunity to be one of a thousand, thousand, thousand arms of the divinity. But we must continually choose to sail with the wind of God, which often means against the wind of man.

As William Temple said, we must have a subjective response to the objective act of God's coming among us. Baptism is not for the good, it's for the willing. We must go along, allow ourselves to be consecrated. Con means with, sacral means divine. Consecrated means with the divine, as a fundamental life orientation. And the first job of the consecrated, the immediate undertaking of the beloved is one of welcome: to give our full attention to the person before us, to listen to their story, see how it overlaps with ours, and tell them they too are beloved.

A story is told about an elderly couple, let's call them Wilma and Wilmer, plugging away together for many decades. One day, as she's patting the *köttbullar* together, Wilma asks, "How come it's been so many years since you told me you loved me?" Puzzled, Wilmer looks up from his *dagbladet* and says, "Oh! I thought our deal was: If I ever stopped loving you, I should let you know." Unlike Wilmer, our health and happiness come in reaffirming our attitude, rejuvenating our intention and recommencing our activity as consecrated people, people with divinity, people sailing towards God's glory.

Annie Dillard writes: "I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty bats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them."

As *Avalokiteshvara* sought so earnestly to do, with her eleven heads and thousand arms, so we must seek to do ourselves: Shatter the cycles of unhappiness, fear and despair that imprison so many; remind ourselves and each other that we have not only heard of, but also received the Holy Spirit, and act like the beloved children of God we are. This is the glory revealed to us in the Epiphany. This is the glory of God come among us in Jesus the Christ. This is our glory too if only we will embrace it.

Hymn 135 Songs of faithfulness and praise

Songs of thankfulness and praise, Jesus, Lord, to you we raise,
Manifested by the star to the Magi from afar,
Branch of royal David's stem, in your birth at Bethlehem.
Anthems be to you addressed, God in man made manifest.

Manifest at Jordan's stream, Prophet, Priest, and King supreme,
And at Cana, wedding guest, in your Godhead manifest;
Manifest in pow'r divine, changing water into wine.
Anthems be to you addressed, God in man made manifest.

Grant us grace to see you, Lord, mirrored in your holy Word.
May our lives and all we do imitate and honor you
That we all like you may be at your great epiphany
And may praise you, ever blest, God in man made manifest.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MYQdSicqkM>

Hymn 398 I sing the almighty power of God

I sing the almighty power of God, who made the mountains rise,
That spread the flowing seas abroad and built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at his command, and all the stars obey.

I sing the goodness of the Lord, that filled the earth with food;
He formed the creatures with his Word, and then pronounced them good.
Lord, how thy wonders are displayed, where'er I turn my eye,
If I survey the ground I tread, or gaze upon the sky!

There's not a plant or flower below, but makes thy glories known;
And clouds arise, and tempests blow, by order from thy throne;
While all that borrows life from thee is ever in thy care,
And everywhere that I could be, thou, God, art present there.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9scUBbj7mc>

Journey of the Magi

A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow. There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it. At the end we preferred to travel all night, sleeping
in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins,
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down this set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

T.S. Eliot