

“New Epiphanies”

Rev. David Gregory

January 2, 2022

Epiphany



Adoration of the Children
Gerard van Honthorst

Readings

John 1:10-14

adapted from the Common English Bible

The light was in the world,
and the world came into being through the light,
but the world didn't recognize the light.

The light came to his own people,
and his own people didn't welcome him.

But those who did welcome him,
those who believed in his name,
he saw as God's children,
born not from blood
nor from human desire or passion,
but born from God.

The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.

We have seen his glory,
glory like that of one's only offspring,
full of grace and truth.

“A Blessing For Light” (an excerpt)
in *To Bless the Space Between Us*
by John O’Donohue

Light cannot see inside things.
That is what the dark is for:
Minding the interior,
Nurturing the draw of growth
Through places where death
In its own way turns into life.

In the glare of neon times,
Let our eyes not be worn
By surfaces that shine
With hunger made attractive.

That our thoughts may be true light,
Finding their way into words
Which have the weight of shadow
To hold the layers of truth.

That we never place our trust
In minds claimed by empty light,
Where one-sided certainties
Are driven by false desire.
When we look into the heart,
May our eyes have the kindness
And reverence of candlelight.

And when we come to search for God,
Let us first be robed in night,
Put on the mind of morning
To feel the rush of light
Spread slowly inside
The color and stillness
Of a found world.

Crossing this threshold into 2022 has been a remarkable experience. There have been fires of apocalyptic proportions in Boulder County, Colorado within a couple of miles of where I was living forty years ago. A thousand buildings, mostly homes, have been lost, and several people appear to be missing. Our thoughts and prayers are certainly with all of those affected. Covid numbers are spiking, perhaps fueled by the holidays and omicron. It’s not a great time to be flying, since flying seems to be more about not flying. We’re in an uncomfortable stand-off with Russia again. And Betty White has made her transition seventeen days shy of her 100th birthday. Why couldn’t we have sent her to take care of Putin? She was one of the most disarming people ever to walk the planet. We could use more of those.

Another thing I’ve been reminded of at this threshold is that the world is now owned by Apple, Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Netflix, meaning that our daily existence and our connections to one another are increasingly tied to these platforms—oh, and I forgot Zoom. Speaking of Netflix, if you have not seen the film, “Don’t Look Up,” you probably need to. I’m not sure there is a better commentary on our times, and on the nature of truth itself. Its humor is disarming, but the irony of it has quite a bite. My only advice is that you must watch it to the very end of the very end of the credits, because there are two little scenes tucked into them that are essential. That’s as close as you get to any spoilers from me.

What I will say is that this film had me thinking about a couple of times in recent years that I found myself actually looking up. One of them was during the Great American Eclipse in August of 2017, a total solar eclipse that was visible from the Pacific to Atlantic coasts in the U.S.A. That afternoon I made my way across the street from our apartment in Manhattan to climb the hill facing the Hudson River in Fort Tryon Park to

join a standing-room-only crowd of people in front of the Cloisters Museum, all of us with little protective glasses, no one looking at each other, everyone looking up. Violet and I found a nice bench in a perfect spot, and I got to witness an incredible sight that I will never forget. And then a year ago, December 21, 2020, there was the Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, sometimes called the “Christmas Star,” which happens every twenty years or so. It was a fairly cloudy night, but we went for a walk anyhow, and as we rounded a corner in our neighborhood in Novato, there it was for a brief few minutes. People were on their steps pointing up, looking up, talking to total strangers because of the brightness and immensity of what we were seeing, and because as humans we were seeing it TOGETHER. It’s easy to understand how the ancients might have been affected by the things they saw in the heavens, but those events have deeper meaning only when you’re looking for them. Many people just go about their business without noticing any of it.

The traditional religious observance of Epiphany is about such an event. Most people never really knew what was happening; maybe some shepherds on a hillside. There definitely were some astrologers from the East who set out on a journey because of what they saw. They weren’t kings, and we have no idea how many of them there were. The “three kings of the orient” are part of a tradition that was never found in scripture. The language of scripture suggests that Jesus was a toddler, and the visit of the “three kings” was to a house and not a stable. All we can say of these strange folks is that they were “looking up,” they were noticing what they were noticing, and it gave them a sense that they needed to seek something larger and more encompassing than their local day-to-day existence. In a word it was an “epiphany,” a recognition of light, that took them beyond themselves and into a bond with other humans they would not have otherwise known.

Jesus is said to have contained a light that much of the world did not recognize. Those who were looking for it saw it, and others did not. It’s not that it could not be found. It is the light that is in everything, it infuses everything we call life, including but not limited to this child, whose birth seemed to be a sign for some that the darkness of the world can be penetrated by the smallest ray of light. And this is where the universal blessing of it is, according to John O’Donohue:

Light cannot see inside things.
That is what the dark is for:
Minding the interior,
Nurturing the draw of growth
Through places where death
In its own way turns into life.

In the glare of neon times,
Let our eyes not be worn
By surfaces that shine
With hunger made attractive.

That our thoughts may be true light,
Finding their way into words
Which have the weight of shadow
To hold the layers of truth.

That we never place our trust
In minds claimed by empty light,
Where one-sided certainties
Are driven by false desire.
When we look into the heart,
May our eyes have the kindness
And reverence of candlelight.

And when we come to search for God,
Let us first be robed in night,
Put on the mind of morning
To feel the rush of light
Spread slowly inside
The color and stillness
Of a found world.

Epiphany is not our dogma, but our postmodern faith and spiritual practices allow us to embrace its rhythm, especially as we begin an entirely new year in a world characterized by cataclysm and flux. Having passed the winter solstice, the days are beginning slowly at first to lengthen. Somewhere in this darkness a ray of light begins to shine, and we begin again—not to re-live a year from our past, but to live a year that is entirely new, full of creative energy, abundant wisdom, unconditional love, self-evident truth, honesty and authenticity, or as it has been said in another time and place, “peace, good will toward all.”

Where are you seeking light in the new year? What areas of darkness might be giving way to a gradual and steady increase of enlightenment? Author Anne Hillman brings us a brief poem that I think is the perfect invocation for a new year:

We look with uncertainty
Beyond the old choices for
Clear-cut answers
To a softer, more permeable aliveness
Which is every moment
At the brink of death;
For something new is being born in us
If we but let it.
We stand at a new doorway,
Awaiting that which comes . . .
Daring to be human creatures,
Vulnerable to the beauty of existence.
Learning to love.

To that I can only add, “Let’s keep looking up.”

