

## “Possibilities Unfolding”

January 8, 2023

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### Readings

Isaiah 42: 5-7

from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*

God's message, the God who created the cosmos, stretched out the skies, laid out the earth and all that grows from it, Who breathes life into earth's people, makes them alive with [God's] life: I am God, I have called you to live right and well. I have taken responsibility for you, kept you safe. I have set you among my people as a lighthouse to the nations, to make a start at bringing people into the open, into light: opening blind eyes ...

From Mary Oliver's *The World I live In*

I have refused to live locked in the orderly house of reasons and proofs. The world I live in and believe in is wider than that. And anyway, what's wrong with Maybe? You wouldn't believe what once or twice I have seen. I'll just tell you this: only if there are angels in your head will you ever, possibly, see one.

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I want first to offer the definition of “possible,” which is: that can be or exist ... that may or may not happen, that can be done, selected, permissible, perhaps, *maybe*. So another title for today's message could be “Maybes unfolding.”

January 8<sup>th</sup> is the first Sunday of the new liturgical season called Epiphany, and it lasts until Lent. Theologian Diana Butler Bass states “the origins and definition of Epiphany as a church festival are somewhat vague, as is the very definition of the word.” She goes on:

[Epiphany] can mean manifestation, revelation, appearance, insight, enlightenment, or a shining forth. Epiphany begins with the story of the Magi, three astrologers, who follow a brilliant star to the place of Jesus's birth” to honor the child with gifts. The wise men [what Bass calls “professional Spiritual seekers”] awaited a sign in the sky — a star — to guide them on this journey. Revelations break in, light shines forth, and glory appears. Such things are from the realms of mystery, awe, and wonder. They surprise and disrupt the normal course of existence. Epiphanies are not of our making.

Diana reminds us that while

we do not create Epiphanies, we are given the chance to respond to them if we can be alert to their appearance and search out the trailing of their presence. Revelations can be missed if one isn't attentive or attuned to the possibilities of *sacred surprise*. Epiphanies grab a hold of us; we can't shake them. Epiphanies ask something of us. The star (as light) is an invitation, a calling to do something — to act.

These verses from Isaiah, traditionally read at Epiphany, underscore this idea:

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of [God] has risen upon you.*

Epiphany is a manifestation, the mystery revealed, and an *invitation to discover grace, goodness, and God*. It is neither a magic fix nor a moment when utopia arrives. But [even with] the birth, the star, and heavenly glory, the darkness is not eliminated. Rather, such revelations (like a flashlight) cast the light that we need to see the way. Epiphany beckons us to pay attention and participate in widening the circle of light in the world — to push back against all brittle injustice and brutality. Whether a babe in Bethlehem or a burning bush, epiphanies are guide stars on a longer journey toward healing, liberation, and peace.

My Friends, not only are we in the beginning of Epiphany, we are also still in the midst of great darkness, wandering our way through the collapse of politics as we have known it, climate changes producing catastrophic disasters everywhere, families struggling with dreams that keep disappearing in spite of exhausting efforts to keep them afloat, relationships fractured or lost over differing unresolvable values or death, fears moving forward, with the pandemic creating even harsher variants that could do any of us in. All of us living today find ourselves in some kind of personal darkness. We are in need of lights, epiphanies, angel guides to point us toward something brighter, better, good.

As a congregation, we are searching not only for our next leader, but for our own future here. We cannot survive and leave any kind of legacy if we just continue to come to this building on Sunday mornings, keep paying the utilities, and watch those of us gathered now disappear. We cannot wait for the next minister to try to perform magic. The time to begin to shape a new and different future is upon us. This is the time to explore ideas, possibilities, dreams of what kind of community we can become, not just wait another six months or more to see what is next. While CCC is dear to most of us, we also have the reputation of being “clique-ish,” fixed in our ways, a bit standoffish. It's time, my friends, to change our ways of being with one another. It's time to stop the unasked-for critique, looking for perfectionism in someone else, looking at others' faults rather than our own, letting the other guy or gal carry the load, refusing to let go of the past that no longer allows us to see/feel/want anything new. We need to stop just waiting to die.

Many of us consider this building to be a sort of second home. But do we really treat it as such? Is it a safe and welcoming place for all to share who we are or are trying to become? Is it a place that nurtures, or tolerates and avoids? Is this a place that stimulates new explorations and ideas and supports ventures, or are we stuck in what used to be? I believe that in this time of expectation, we all have opportunities to bring forth hopes for something better.

One of the blessings of being in this kind of a leadership role as your bridge ministers, as well as being long-time members of the community is to be able to step into some of the deep areas of who we are and what we want from each other as each of us continues on his or her own faith journey. In order to explore possibilities for the future, you first have to know what already exists. Bill and I have to try to understand who you are and why you come here to this building (or on Zoom) and listen to what we have to say each week. (If you *don't* come here, or don't come consistently, we need to understand that, too.) Having this kind of understanding is part of what will help potential ministers decide whether or not to venture into this intimate community and to explore whether they might be a good fit for us. Might someone dare to try to be a leader here?

For the rest of this message, I am going to share a bit about what I am learning so far in these first four months. Along with being an "aging and diminishing community," most of us are nearing retirement or retired some time ago. But the fact is that we are all learning every day how to live longer in healthy, productive ways. Some of us have been retired for thirty years or more! We have experienced a different world from what our parents experienced during their parenting years. That world included movements such as the sexual revolution, which changed forever the mores and behavior of children from middle school age and up. Many of those children lived in families fractured by a fifty percent national divorce rate; they were affected by easy access to mind-bending drugs and alcohol, by the fact that generations no longer lived together and sometimes didn't even speak to one another. They experienced an increase in marriages and friendships that sought to blend diverse racial and cultural upbringings into normal, acceptable relationships and lifestyles.

We need only look at the last three years to realize that we have all survived traumas, unexpected losses, and personal upheavals. I can't tell you how often I have heard from folks, "I am 82 (or 85 or 89), and I can't do what I used to, nor do I have much energy. I just don't have much more to give, so don't count on me to even think about possibilities." Believe me, I understand the weariness and the aches, but I also know living life with purpose and good will makes for a happier existence and outlook. So what about the possibilities, the *maybes*? I hold the picture of the women's retreat in October as an example. What was it that brought over seventy women for an eight-hour day to this building and held their energy and interest to the end? What was learned about the needs of those of us here as well as the strangers who ventured in? Here are four things I observed.

1. We as women need safe places to meet and be nurtured.
2. We need stimulating presentations, books, activities, to pull us into something other than our everyday tasks, worries and challenges.
3. We need quiet, reflective, prayerful space to guide us to peaceful moments.
4. We appreciate the conversations and friendly interactions with each other.

Might the women's retreat offer a model to explore on which to base future offerings to the wider community? Might there be several kinds of book groups with discussions over tea and crumpets once a month? Dinners for strangers as well as friends? Might there be folks willing to share a particular skill or interest such as bread-baking, making simple desert treats, weaving, quilting, painting, sewing, knitting, bird-watching, windowsill plantings, strumming a uke, singing? Who might show up just to put a puzzle together or play chess or pinocle, to build a new friendship? What might men here and in the community be interested in that would bring them together, beyond sports and competition? What would be

appealing to them and to men in the wider community? To expand further on this notion of gathering together, how might teen-agers respond to having a safe place to be with adults who listened, or to walking the labyrinth, followed by hot chocolate and donuts? What about the concept of a drop-in center? Or a monthly or weekly Friday evening musical fun fest lasting an hour, starting at 6:00 p.m. with singing together for fifteen minutes, followed by fifteen minutes of a meaningful presentation (e.g., on “living one’s values in a changing world”), followed by fifteen minutes to eat together (sloppy joes, tacos, pizza), with a final fifteen minutes to play a game together? This hour would be open to families of all ages.

What about inviting youth groups from other churches or school clubs to share their experiences when they have gone to Mexico on a project, or volunteered at the food bank? Or perhaps they’d like to tell us why they signed up to learn how to be a part of search and rescue teams, or to participate in school plays, etc. For any of you fortunate enough to have attended Scott’s students’ play “Into the Woods” last month, perhaps you came away wondering what other productions might be sponsored if we were a part of them, if we were to invite and support interested youth in this community, and not just from one school. Here’s a really wild idea: What do you think might emerge if we invited several Marin “movers and shakers” to be in a think tank conversation with us regarding ways we might invest some of the million dollars recently gifted to CCC in establishing something needed and new here?

Going back to the Mary Oliver quote in which she refers to the “maybes,” are there any angels in your head trying to get your attention? Can you muster a faith that looks for the positives going on, that believes in new opportunities? Is it time to walk bravely into the unknown? Can we find ways to do it together? Isaiah tells us that we can follow the light and bring folks with us into the light, opening blind eyes, to get through the darkness.

[At this point in the message, Ann gave us twenty minutes to talk together about what may have been stirred in us by her words.]

In closing I want to use some words from a favorite author and friend of mine, Madeline L’Engle, but first I want to tell you a quick story about her. I had the opportunity while we were working in New York to get to take a weekend writing workshop with her and four others in a rather isolated retreat center up state. It was a delightful experience which included Madeline and me walking her lovely golden retriever dog a couple times a day while continuing our conversations together. Bill drove up from New York to pick me up at the end of the retreat, and was greeted and surprised with tea and a cake which Madeline had made because I had mentioned it was Bill’s birthday. If you have read any of Madeline’s books, you know why she is one of my highly valued guides. Maybe you will find her words — a seasonal benediction of sorts — helpful in capturing the fullest sense of Epiphany:

*This is my charge to you.  
You are to be a light bearer.  
You are to choose the light.*

Arise, my friends, and shine on.

Amen