

Jan. 8, 2017 St. Cyprians Episc. St. Augustine **“The Rafts on the River”** Rev. Warren Clark

Epiphany: [Isaiah 60:1-6](#) • [Psalm 72:1-7, 10- 14](#) • [Ephesians 3:1-12](#) • [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

*Today we read the scriptures for Epiphany. But, what IS an epiphany?*

(1): a usually sudden manifestation of the [essential](#) nature of something (2): an intuitive grasp of reality through something simple and striking (3): a revealing scene or moment

*Well, here's a revealing scene...* You DO know what would have happened if it had been three wise WOMEN instead of men, don't you? They would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought disposable diapers as gifts!

## **In the Gospel reading, the Magi bring unexpected treasures**

to the baby Jesus and his family. The four Gospels are filled with stories about God's spirit showering Jesus with unexpected gifts ...not of gold or silver, but of perception, understanding and compassion. Jesus had a way of perceiving the essential nature of the loving creative power for good (many call this God). By the time Jesus is 12 or so, he is making the journey to the temple. There are stories of Jesus' penetrating questions with leading Jewish scholars.



By the time he is 30 or so, he repeatedly goes to the wilderness, and receives deeper understandings about temptations of wealth, power, and fame. Jesus grows to trust this loving presence so much he call it “abba”, or daddy.

Jesus grasps essential truths by observing simple events... like the frantic search for a pearl of great price and the way just a pinch of yeast can expand a whole loaf of bread. These are epiphanies. He told them as parables, beatitudes and revolutionary teachings.

Jesus prepared himself to see those gifts of God. He took time to be quiet in nature. He read the Hebrew prophets' vision of a fair and compassionate society. He learned to ask Spirit for insight. He asked for and received guidance about tough decisions, and courage to speak truth to the powerful.

Many believe that epiphanies are rare events; mountaintop experiences; once (or twice) in a lifetime. ***What if they are not?!*** What if epiphanies are a regular outpouring of the loving creative power for good? It may simply be that many of us do not know how to prepare ourselves to receive the gifts a loving God offers to us.

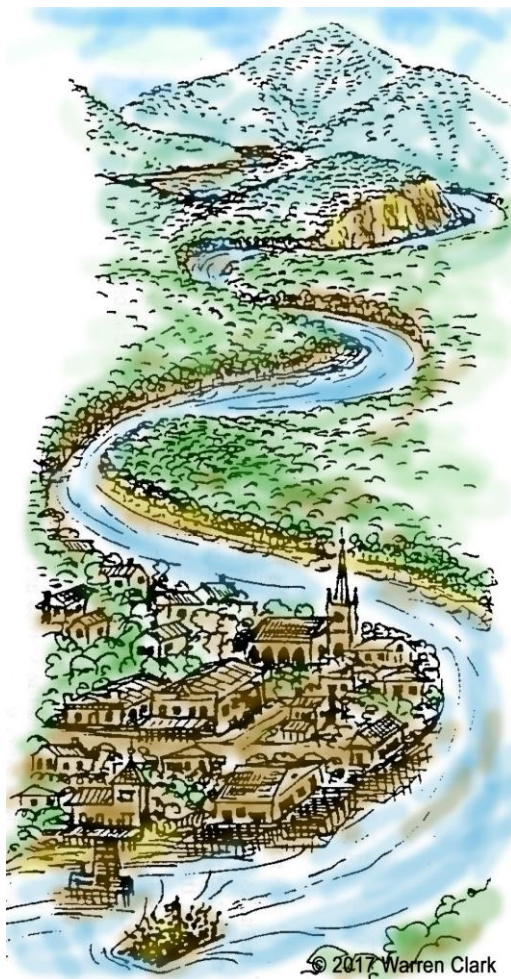
I was struggling a bit on Thursday. I went to the weekly prayer group I've been in for two years. It is a safe place. I shared that on that day I was in a dark mood. Later, I read out loud the first step into the prayer process we use. It reads:

*“I gratefully acknowledge that here is a loving, creative power for good in the Universe, which is active in me and all others.”* The words “I gratefully acknowledge” stuck in my awareness. I said out loud, “Huh!” I was having an epiphany.

Later when I identified my prayer request for this week, I asked my partners to support me in **acknowledging with gratitude the blessings in my life**. It was just the right prayer request! That night I got a note pad and pen, and just before turning out the light, I wrote about three blessings for which I am grateful. The next day as opportunities arose, I acknowledged my gratitude to the persons involved.

I am writing about three blessings every night. I also am communicating my gratitude in a variety of ways. Something so simple as a gratitude journal has me more awake to other blessings. It is one of many ways to be more receptive to the gifts of Spirit we call “epiphanies”.

**Isaiah 60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come**, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” This echoes the intention of the Puritans who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Their governor, JOHN WINTHROP, stated their purpose quite clearly: “We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” This sentiment has come down in the founding documents of our land with phrases like, “liberty and justice for all”. It’s still a work in progress.



When I moved to Tampa 35 years ago, I wanted to help expand that idea of liberty and justice for all in concrete ways. Soon was working part-time with Tampa United Methodist Centers. I started their Hunger Action Program. We organized low-income food cooperatives in 9 locations across Hillsborough County.

I also worked part-time with Florida Impact which is Christians, Jews and Unitarians who lobby Tallahassee and Washington on hunger, homeless, farm-worker and death penalty legislation. That’s where I first heard the story of the **“Rafts on the River”**.

There was a small town on a big river. One day a raft with 20 hungry, ragged children beached near the town. It was beautiful how the townspeople cared for those children.

A month later another raft with about 20 more hungry children washed up in town. People not taken a child last month, took in these children. The next month yet another raft of children came down the river. Some of the townsfolk were grumbling. They had raised taxes to care for all the children. The town was strained to

the limits! By the fourth month when the next raft was spotted, people with long poles waded into the river. Other townsfolk were screaming at them saying that they had to

help the children. When the raft appeared the people with poles pushed it out into the current as the children were pleading for food. Everyone was in conflict.

Not once did anyone think to send a canoe upstream to find out why the children were coming month after month. Generation after generation lots of hungry children do poorly in schools and drop out. Single parents work two jobs but are just a paycheck from eviction... in the world's richest country.

When we write letters to our elected representatives asking them to change public policy, it's like sending canoes up the river to deal with the underlying root causes.

That story triggered an epiphany in me! I realized could create opportunities for people struggling with poverty to speak from their lived experiences to their elected officials. I decided to keep most of the writing on hunger legislation. I got a green light from Tampa United Methodist Centers to give it a try at the low income food cooperatives. When I talked with participants in the food co-ops, I made it clear that their letters might not help them directly. But they could help others who struggle in poverty and hunger. I *was amazed* at how quickly most people were not only willing, but eager to sign a letter or write their own letter.

After talking it over with Fr. Ted, I did letter writing at Dining With Dignity for the first time, just this last Tuesday. Here are some of the things persons who are homeless wrote to Rep. Ron DeSantis about protecting child nutrition programs in schools:

"It is difficult to concentrate and get a proper education with an empty stomach."

"The good Lord above never intended anyone to go hungry, especially children." "As a former educator, I cannot stress (enough) the importance of teaching non-hungry kids."

It is one of my firmest beliefs that empowering people in poverty and on the margins of society to speak for themselves is an important part of aligning the vision of a fair and compassionate America with reality.



**A long time ago** a Psalm writer described a just and compassionate ruler: "Give the king your justice, O God. May he judge your people with righteousness; and your poor with justice. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth."

Last week on National Public Radio, Diane Rheem replayed an interview with Peter and Paul of Peter, Paul and Mary. They talked about singing at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. Paul said that Mary had a way of seeing the broad picture of what was happening. While Dr. King was speaking, she whispered to Paul, "We are watching history happen in front of our eyes." Over time, Mary helped Paul see more clearly the many ways people were engaged in doing good. "Later", Paul said, "I had an epiphany. I realized all the good people are doing really does change things."

By this time I was having an NPR moment. I was parked in front of our home, with the radio still on. Paul quoted something Dr. King said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” I asked myself, **What is the energy that bends the moral arc of the universe?** My question led to my own epiphany: I think it is the pull of the good: the treating others the way I want to be treated, and refusing to treat others the way I wouldn’t want to be treated... done by millions and billions of people from all kinds of faith groups, and no faith groups.

To do this, we are not dependent on a king or even a president. Of course we would want our President to act with fairness and compassion. But, millions doing good decent actions, and demanding that our governments and businesses, and institutions act with basic fairness. ... That is the pull on the arc of the moral universe toward justice. We have become that refreshment of “rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth”, described by the Psalmist.

As we transition peacefully from one President to another, there are many things we cannot control. But there is a precious vision born of ancient Hebrew scripture, embodied in the life of Jesus, and enshrined in our core values as a people; that vision we can hold up in our actions and our advocacy.

Back in my NPR moment, Diane Reem asked Peter and Paul to play the one song out of their entire repertoire that spoke to them now. They chose the song about people taking what was at hand: a bell, a hammer, a song, and being that pull toward a moral universe that is fair, compassionate and empowered by *“the love between my brothers and my sisters all... all over this land.”*

***Now is the time for people of good will and a loving faith to do just that!***

And that leads us to a take-away from this sermon we can apply in our lives. Let’s look at the St. Cyprians Challenge Card.



*Many believe that epiphanies are rare events; mountaintop experiences. **What if they are not?** What if epiphanies are a regular outpouring of the loving creative power for good we call God?*

***St. Cyprians Challenge Card Jan. 8, 2017***

One way to prepare ourselves to receive the gifts a loving God offers is to keep a Gratitude Journal. Place a small tablet and a pen at your bedside. Write: *I acknowledge and am grateful for these blessings in my life:* Then write about 3 blessings each night. (It’s OK to repeat a blessing, but write about it again.)

Place your hand on the words you have written, and give thanks to God for each one. Think how you will acknowledge your gratitude to one or more of the person(s) involved with your blessings the next day.