

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, February 20, 2011 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

A Whole New Way of Thinking and Living

As we approach the end of this season of the Church Year called EPIPHANY I'd like to spend a little time talking with you about the way that our Scripture readings are carefully chosen week-by-week. The word "Epiphany" means opening up, revealing, disclosing, or making known. Now, **what is it** that is being shown to us over these current eight weeks of Sunday worship? In a nutshell, I think what is being revealed to us is a **Whole New Way of Thinking and Living**.

Epiphany is a short course in the Christian Faith, leading us to an eye-opening encounter with Jesus and the incredible difference that his life and ministry makes to each one of us.

Look at where we started: Epiphany's journey begins with the Christmas story. We are presented with a tiny baby born in an obscure place to unremarkable people. Over the course of the past seven Sundays we have watched and heard accounts of how that tiny baby began to affect and influence the thinking and behavior of all sorts of people. From simple shepherds, to powerful kings, and even wise philosophers and scholars, the Word went forth: this is no ordinary person. This is the bearer of eternal Truth. This is one who opens the cloud separating us from our Creator. This is the One who has come to guide us into eternal life.

You have heard me, in the past, liken this whole process to a pebble being dropped into a basin of water. The rings of wave action spread out from the center, growing larger and more forceful with each successive ripple. What started out as vague rumors of an innocent little child soon grow into substantial teachings and actions that have impact and meaning. The Babe of Bethlehem becomes the Lion of Judah—a force for transformation, challenging everything that came before, showing a new way that threatens to turn accepted Truth right on its head!

What the story of Epiphany does is to demonstrate, incrementally, how the power within the message that Jesus brought, taught, and lived slowly began to dawn on everyone. Jesus himself said that he wanted us to know the "good news" that God is love—that God is present, discernible, and engaged **wherever there is love**. God is right here in the midst of us whenever and wherever we look at life and relationships in the same way God sees the world. That perspective can be simply stated: Love is the act of will by which I give as much importance to the good of another as I do to my own welfare and comfort. Easily stated, sure....pleasant to imagine how much better the world would be if we all lived by that norm. But think how challenging that standard is in real life.

I don't know about you but I'm ready to acknowledge that NOTHING is too good for me. I go to all sorts of lengths to obtain comfort, convenience, security, pleasure—for MYSELF. Maybe even I will spend a token amount of time to benefit others but the idea that I am to put myself out for others JUST AS MUCH as for myself?? Now **that** is a radical notion. Someone has long since rightly observed that "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. Rather, it's been found difficult and, therefore, rarely tried!"

If I were to act according to the standard of love that Jesus tells us is what it truly means to be "Children of the Most High" just think what a change it would require in my priorities of how I use my time, talent, and treasure. Or, if such an individual challenge is too much for you to even contemplate, try thinking about how that

notion would absolutely change forever the community, the nation, and the whole world. How would that transform our view of so-called “debtor nations,” what would it say about all forms of political oppression, the subservient role of women, treatment of those in prison, the waging of war?

Now we can begin to see the logical outcome of the analogy about the pebble in the basin of water. A seemingly harmless and inoffensive beginning builds and grows as the implications reveal themselves. The King Herods of the world were smart to sense so quickly the inherent danger of this so-called “Good News”, an idea that had the power to threaten their very existence. The Scribes and the Pharisees soon realized that their religion of fear and control could not stand against this radical notion of love—not love as a harmless Sunday School emotion but as a powerful act of will. The Roman Governor and the Sanhedrin could not stand by and see their authority swept to destruction before this onrushing wave of caring and compassion.

When you look at what’s happening here, it’s easy to understand why the events of Epiphany HAVE to lead to the events of Lent. In just a few weeks we will begin a new round of stories. This time the stories will come from a time much closer to the edges of that figurative basin—the place where the waves become pounding surf, with energy capable of tearing down and reshaping the shores. Unless you understand what Jesus is telling us about love and seek to change the way you think and the way you live then the only alternative is to seek to destroy Jesus and destroy his message. Which, of course, brings us to the Church season of Lent. Trying to destroy Jesus and his message is exactly what we will see as the response of the leaders of his own time. They used the authority and control of political, religious, and military might. It’s true, of course, that they succeeded in killing Jesus but not his message because that message is the eternal Truth about the very glue that holds this world together. God is love. When we try to ignore that truth or resist it in our way of thinking and behaving we only harm ourselves.

I have a friend I’m thinking of right now. He lives a very lonely kind of existence. My worry about him was expressed in a recent correspondence in which I shared my concerns. He’s angry that he had to earn everything he has. He doesn’t believe that he owes anybody anything. In his view, if people who are suffering or in-need, it’s because they’re just lazy. Now there’s no question that if the majority of the people of the world felt that way it would be a pretty sad and miserable place to be. But, more importantly to me, I feel so sorry about the corrosive and bitter poison sloshing about in even this one individual. More and more he is isolated and hate-filled. His communications are increasingly judgmental and derogatory, criticizing everybody—politicians, teachers, voters, children—everybody. His response to life is increasing distance and separation rather than a commitment to tear down the walls that divide us.

So how is it possible to embrace rather than fear or resist the challenge of Jesus. I would be less than honest if I didn’t admit right up front that, without God’s grace, it **isn’t** possible. It is only through God’s mercy and forgiveness that the “Good News” becomes a message of freedom and truth rather than one of guilt. God will give you the capacity to grow and to enlarge your own circle of love. You will never be perfect; you will still hang on to remnants of selfishness and judgment. But you **will** be given the grace to care more and to reach out beyond your own agenda. The first step is to recognize that such growth is exactly what God is willing and working toward. If you can feel grateful for that the rest will begin to flow into place through discovering that using your life, your decisions, your relationships as occasions to say “Thank YOU, God” is what it’s all about.....**a new way of thinking and living.**