

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, January 6, 2023

Epiphany, All Years, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

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My good friend Caroline McCall likes to say that organizations are heliotropic.¹

Caroline is a consultant who works mainly with churches; she cares a lot about how communities can be healthy and thrive. And what she means by heliotropic is growing toward the light. It's a word used mostly about plants. Imagine a plant in a pot on a windowsill. Little by little the plant turns itself toward the light and grows in that direction.

What growing toward the light means for a community, or a church, or an organization, is that we tend to grow toward what we are focusing on; toward where our attention is. If we are preoccupied by anxiety, by narratives of decline, by grudges or internal dysfunction, we may grow more into those things.

¹ I'm grateful to Phil Brochard's newsletter article in *The Pathfinder* of All Souls Parish in Berkeley, CA, January 5, 2023, for bringing Caroline's words about heliotropism to my attention. <http://www.allsoulsparish.org/about-all-souls/pathfinder-newsletter/>.

If instead we choose to put more of our time and energy and attention onto our purpose and mission, the needs of our neighbors and the call of our God, we are likely to grow in those directions instead. The point isn't a kind of Pollyanna complex or putting our heads in the sand and ignoring genuine problems that need attending to. Rather the point is that for us as human beings, and for groups of human beings, there is a deep inner yearning toward health and wholeness, toward growth and maturity and mission. Like a young sunflower we are made to grow toward the light.

Today we celebrate a day of light shining in darkness. Today the Magi move toward the light, a light they see at first in the heavens but that leads them to an even greater light shining in the person of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, the one given to us as one of us so that we might all grow into his image. That image is different for each of us. You are called to grow more and more into Jesus. I am called to grow more and more into Jesus. Yet each one of us is an image of Jesus in a different way, a different facet of the crystal, a different ray shining from the Source.

Here in the Northern Hemisphere where we live this is a season of darkness, of short days only very gradually beginning to lengthen. At this time of year I always feel a little disappointed when my neighbors start to take down their Christmas lights, lights that shone so dazzlingly through the darkness of December, but January is no less dark and I at least feel like we still need the cheer of those twinkles in these long rainy evenings.

In our family we take down our Christmas tree after Epiphany but we tend to leave the lights up on our house through Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the 40th day after Christmas and in many countries traditionally the end of a kind of extended post-Christmas season. At Candlemas we read of the aged prophet Simeon bursting forth with praise to God for sending Jesus as “a Light to enlighten all the nations.” Truly Epiphany is a season of light, from the Magi with their star through Simeon with his song of light through the great gospel reading for the last Sunday after Epiphany when Jesus himself is transformed into a figure of light at the Transfiguration and his disciples see his glory blazing before he begins his journey to the cross.

But this is not a season of glaring light that drives away all darkness. For God is in the darkness too, in the quiet, in the mystery, in times of waiting and times of rest. We are so used to talking about God in terms of light, and with good reason. For a majority of us, those of us for whom sight is the primary sense through which we experience the world, light brings knowledge of our surroundings. It brings safety from stumbling. It helps us know who and what is around us. God is like that. But God is like other things too. God is like the deep enfolding darkness of night that nurtures us to grow and rest and dream. God is like the darkness of the womb that shapes and carries and protects us. God is like the darkness of friends sitting late in companionable silence around a softly glowing fire, a fire whose glow is mesmerizing exactly because of the velvety darkness against which it shines.

The ancient Christian mystic known as Pseudo-Dionysius wrote that “the mystic truths of God lie simple and unchangeable in the dazzling darkness of hidden silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness.”² A dazzling darkness; a hidden mystery; the mystery of Jesus in the womb of Mary; the mystery of the Light of the world lying in a humble house in Bethlehem.

Come to the Light. Bring your treasures to him, your love, your time, your attention, the best of who you are, and you will grow toward him, and he will guide you into the fullness of who you have been created to be from the foundation of the world.

² *The Mystical Theology*, ch. 1.