

Title: David's Epiphany
Text: Psalm 139: 1 – 18
Date: January 14, 2018

While I am sure that some of you are aware of this, in terms of the liturgical calendar this is the second Sunday after Epiphany, and the gospel texts are intended to highlight unique aspects of the person of Jesus. In more general terms the word epiphany can refer to a manifestation, but also to *receiving* that manifestation in a sudden, deep, intuitive perception into the essential meaning of something. This text that we just read is an amazing example of a deep, intuitive perception into the essence of life itself!

This psalm has profound insights into the interconnection between our understanding of our Self, and our understanding of the divine. The more we understand God, the more we understand who we are. The more we understand who we are, the more we understand Spirit. According to the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, the unity of self depends upon an ultimate unity behind all things. He writes, **"In religious language, the soul and God belong together; or otherwise stated, I am one within myself as I encounter the One in all actions upon me . . . And my response to every particular action takes the form of a response to the One that is active in it."**

By way of illustration, most of us are guarded and calculating when it comes to revealing the depths of who we are, and what we struggle with. We project a certain *persona* to others and, when we think about it, even to God. The epiphany of the psalmist is we can't hide from God!

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away . . .
⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

And while most of us would recoil at the thought of such transparency, the *deeper* epiphany is that rather than a terrifying thought, it can be a welcomed thought as we are touched by grace.

**Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it. (v. 6)**

And the psalmist even concludes with an invitation:

**Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts. (v. 23)**

So much of the psalm is a back and forth between "I" and "You" that I am reminded of a poem by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. In *Tales of the Hasadim* he offers these words concerning the relationship between God and humankind:

**Where I wander - You!
Where I ponder - You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
When I am gladdened - You!
When I am saddened - You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
Sky is You, Earth is You!**

**You above! You below!
In every trend, at every end,
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!**

* * *

I feel a need to pivot now because when many of us think of epiphanies, or mystical insights, our thoughts are limited to “I” and “Thou” experiences. Yet epiphanies can also help us grasp the connection between ourselves and others. If I am conscious that the Creator **“knit me together in my mother’s womb,”** (v. 13) I must likewise be aware that the Creator knit *you* together in your mother’s womb as well . . . and God don’t make no junk! Yet it is the nature of epiphanies that you move beyond logical conclusions into the realm of intuitive knowing.

Like the psalmist, Martin Luther King, Jr. was full of epiphanies. While he was a great orator, his words conveyed a deep sense of profound knowing.

In the spirit of an epiphany he said: **“Darkness cannot drive out our darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”** At my last church, these were words that were recited every Sunday as we lit the Peace candle.

In the spirit of an epiphany he said: **“Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”**

In the spirit of an epiphany he said: **“We may have all come on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.”**

In the spirit of an epiphany he said: **“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”**

In the spirit of an epiphany he said: **“The moral arc of the universe bends at the elbow of justice.”**

In the spirit of an epiphany he said: **“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”**

In the spirit of an epiphany he said: **“Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. I am not unmindful of the fact that violence often brings about momentary results. Nations have frequently won their independence in battle. But in spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace.”**

The overarching observation here is that such epiphanies are more than the stuff of lectures, but they lead to action. That is why he said: **“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”**

While the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. ushered in a new era by getting people out of the pews and into “Whites Only” sections of coffee shops – and while we honor him by renaming streets after him – the past year or two has revealed such racism in our society that we wonder about the strides we thought we made. Our President’s “Make America Great Again” nationalism, his disdain for people of color, his fear of people of other faiths, are all alarming. Perhaps even more frightening are those who feel newly empowered by waves of white supremacy – not to mention disturbingly large numbers of white evangelical Christians who share in these views.

So while we honor Martin Luther King, Jr. this weekend, we are reminded that our striving for justice is far from complete. We need to continue to strive for justice so the world sees that we care. Martin Luther King reminds us that, **"Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle."**

I could argue for the logic of a just society, but we would benefit more from a deep intuitive sense of us all being connected with one another, *and* with the divine. David had his epiphany. Martin Luther King had many epiphanies. Are you ready for your own epiphany?

The role of contemplative Christianity is not all about withdrawing from the world. Joan Chittister reminds us: **"Contemplation is a very dangerous activity. It not only brings us face to face with God. It brings us, as well, face to face with the world, face to face with the self. And then, of course, something must be done. Nothing stays the same once we have found the God within. We carry the world in our hearts: the oppression of all peoples, the suffering of our friends, the burdens of our enemies, the raping of the Earth, the hunger of the starving, the joy of every laughing child."**

Sometimes the clarity of these insights ebbs and flows, but the Spirit always calls us to reclaim the Center.

Martin Luther King writes in his autobiography of a time when he was pacing the kitchen floor in the middle of the night. He was starting to panic about the safety of his family. He was churning inside. At midnight he prayed these words: **"I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."**

He continues, **"At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."**

His conclusion reminds me of our psalm this morning:

**Where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
. . . even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.**

That kitchen epiphany was put to the test just three days later. While he was preaching to a large crowd at a church a bomb went off on the front porch of his home. When he was informed of this after the service, he first asked if his wife and baby were OK. That was unclear at the time.

He continues: **"Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it. I urged each person to go straight home after the meeting and adhere strictly to our philosophy of nonviolence. I admonished them not to become panicky and lose their heads. "Let us keep moving," I urged them, "with the faith that what we are doing is right, and with the even greater faith that God is with us in the struggle."**

As I said before, when we have our own epiphany, we are not called to withdraw from the world, but to have a new way of being in the world. Bonhoeffer argued, **“As much as the Christian would like to remain distant from political struggle, nonetheless, even here the commandment of love urges the Christian to stand up for his neighbor.”**

So where do *you* go from here? Since you can't control epiphanies, one follow-up step just might be to attend the anti-racism training that we are offering in this Presbyterian Meeting House on February 17. Or perhaps on April 4th – the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination – you could join us on the National Mall in D.C. for a rally to finish the work of dismantling racism – sponsored in part by the National Council of Churches.

Remember: **“Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.”**

Amen.

Psalm 139: 1 - 18

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”

¹²even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.