

The Feast of Epiphany
Sermon at St. John' Chapel
Kwok Pui Lan
January 6, 2005

Today we celebrate the feast of Epiphany, a feast that honored the Baptism of Christ in the Eastern Church since the third century. Together with Easter and Pentecost, the Epiphany is one of the most significant holy days in the Eastern tradition. The feast was introduced to the Western Church in the fourth century, and it gradually was disassociated with the Baptism of Christ. Instead, the emphasis has been on the manifestation of the Good News to the Gentiles through the figure of the Magi.

I usually remember one particular person on the day of the Epiphany: the medieval historian John Boswell, a former professor at Yale University. Professor Boswell came to preach in this chapel on the feast of Epiphany, when I was still quite new to EDS. He was the critically acclaimed author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. In his sermon, he talked about the struggles of gays and lesbians in America and gay bashing in the military. But most importantly, he talked about the love of God through his experience as a gay man. He said, just as the incarnation of Jesus is an epiphany, an event that makes the mystery of the love of God concrete to us, gay men and lesbians also make the abstract concept of homosexuality real and concrete. Same-sex love reveals a new dimension of the love of God that the society disavows. It affirms that the love of God that is greater than hatred, self-righteousness, and intolerance.

Professor Boswell was working on the manuscript *Same-Sex Unions*, and during his luncheon meeting with the faculty, he shared his experience of going to different European libraries and archives to collect those rites that same-sex lovers had used in pre-modern Europe to sanctify their unions. The book is based on more than 60 manuscripts

between 8th to 16th centuries. Even before the book was published, people were asking him to let them look at the liturgies so that they could adapt and use them. Boswell died in 1994 when he was only 47, and did not live to see the day that gay couples could legally marry in the United States. I remember him especially on this first epiphany after gay couples have won their right to marry in the Commonwealth.

Since listening to Boswell, I have continued to ponder the meaning of epiphany and the relationship between the mystery of the love of God and our love for one another. Since May 17, I have been invited to the marriage or the blessing of union of four same-sex couples, including two alumnae, a faculty colleague, and a student. Each of these occasions was a holy and epiphanic experience for me—for I was brought to a richer understanding of their love for each other, our love and support for them, and the manifestation of God's love in our midst. I attended one ceremony in which the couple's child was asked if he would support the two daddies that were getting married. We all smiled when the little child, who was only 4, said, "I will." It was only when we see family in its so many different incarnations that we will come to a fuller understanding of what a family means.

In spite of the church's brokenness, I was able to see a glimpse of the church as the body of Christ in a concrete and not abstract way. During those moments when I have doubts about the church or about God, I hold onto these epiphanic moments as memory of hope and enlightenment.

The Isaiah passage (60:1-6,9) begins with "Arise, shine, your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany form the season of light, light that seeps through into the world and explodes into the night's

darkest moments. We have to remember that the images of light and darkness have different meanings and symbolic significance in the Mediterranean world. Megan Mckenna explains: “the early church had two pivotal seasons of the year, Easter and Epiphany—the poles of light at the beginning and end of the life of Christ, the light of the world. There were the times for baptism, for extending the light to new believers.” Gradually and especially in the last century, the focus has been shifted from Epiphany to Christmas.

It is important to see that the glory of God was revealed in a humble place and in an unexpected way. And it was the strangers and the outsiders, the wise ones from the East, who had come from afar bearing gifts and homage to the newborn child. According to Nancy Wilson, an elder of the MCC church and the author of *Our Tribes, Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible*, the magi might belong to the queer folks in the Bible. They were the wise ones, good in astronomy and were not afraid to cross the boundaries of cultures, religions, and places. They may be considered the queer ones in their time.

As we listen to the sweet story of the magi finding baby Jesus and offering their treasures, our minds may think of the lives of many innocent children who were lost in the midst of waves of the tsunami in South and South East Asia. A profound sense of grief arose in me when I saw a picture of the dead bodies of babies in this week’s *Newsweek*. Some of them were naked, others covered with blankets. I thought of the orphans, the parents who died, the numerous people whose bodies could not be found or identified. Over 150,000 lives were lost when the water crashed in, rising above thirty feet and devouring everything on its way.

Where is God? And where can we find the manifestation of God's love at moments like this?

It always seem cruel to me to find moral and religious lessons out of somebody else's tragedy. It is even astonishing that some would even suggest that it is "a warning of the judgment of God." At moments of loss and uncertainty, we rely on the ancient wisdom of people who have experienced and survived many tragedies throughout their history. I remember listening to a rabbi talking about the Holocaust many years ago. When asked, How can the Jews believe in God after so much loss and the suffering of the innocent? The rabbi said, we don't know how, but as Jews, we have been debating, questioning, and demanding God for an answer for a long time. Throughout the Bible and especially during the exodus, the Jewish people have been calling out to God, demanding God to justify God's own action. I found comfort and solace in that God allows us to ask these soul-searching questions. It is not a lack of faith when we argue with God and demand God for an answer. It is precisely faith seeking understanding, a vocation of all of us who are learning and doing theology.

In the Jewish magazine, *Tikkun*, there is a section called "Ask the Rabbi," and a reader asked how could God have allowed this tragedy to happen. Rabbi Michael Lerner responds: "I don't know and there are no answers, but only responses to the question. The difference is this: an answer seeks to dissolve the question, a response recognizes the ongoing validity of the question and seeks to remain in connection with it."

Then the Rabbi suggests that we should stop "thinking of God as some big man up in heaven sitting there and making individual judgments about who shall live and who shall die, where he should put a tsunami and where he should put a beautiful sunset.

Instead, understand God as THE FORCE OF HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE UNIVERSE, the aspect of the universe that is the source of love, kindness, generosity, social justice, peace and evolving consciousness, and that this aspect of the universe permeates every ounce of being, every cell, and unifies all being.”

After the disaster, we saw the epiphanic moments of the outpouring of grief, love, and compassion for the victims and those whose whole village has been lost in the waters. More than 2 billion dollars have been gathered for relief purposes, and more donations are coming each day. At a small school like EDS, students have started the compassion fund, prayers for those affected are being collected, and Yolanda was recognized by her church for having gone door to door in her neighborhood to collect donations. Our collective grieving as one human family and our reaching out to others in need are concrete manifestations of God as the force of healing and transformation in the universe.

Epiphany does not start with something grand. It begins with a star and the finding of a little baby with her mother. At our last Eucharist during the Advent season, the Rev. Ann Franklin in her sermon invited us to enter into the miracle of expectation. In epiphany, let us remember and hold onto those moments that God has revealed the power of love in our lives and proclaim that God’s hidden glory still shines here on earth, a radiance beneath even suffering, terror, death, and loss. Amen.

