

The Art of Knowing: A New Year Sermon by Rev. Lori Staubitz

Whether you partied hardy, quietly enjoyed an evening with a good book or movie, or slept soundly well before midnight...this past week we have all passed through the portals of one year into the next.

January comes from the name Janus. Janus is the Roman god of gates and doors (*ianua*), beginnings and endings, and hence represented with a double-faced head, each looking in opposite direction –one backward into the past and the other forward, into the future. Janus also represents the transition between primitive life and civilization. –from Micha F. Lindemans; Wikipedia reference)



JANUS

The New Year presents each of us with an opportunity to reflect upon the past in order to implement positive change for the future. We have all done it...looked back upon past mistakes and set our minds to seems simple enough right? If only it were that simple.

But the truth that self knowledge alone is insufficient to impact real change in our personal lives and has a limited impact upon the ways we strive to work together to help us make significant contributions to the world at large.

Knowledge is defined variously as

- (i) expertise, and skills acquired by a person through [experience](#) or [education](#); the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject,
- (ii) what is known in a particular field or in total; facts and information or
- (iii) awareness or familiarity gained by experience of a fact or situation.

Knowledge acquisition involves complex [cognitive](#) processes: perception, learning, communication, association and [reasoning](#). The term *knowledge* is also used to mean the confident [understanding](#) of a subject with the ability to use it for a specific purpose. (Wikipedia; [Oxford English Dictionary](#))

The scientific method has been used to answer the questions of “What do we know to be true.”

The literature contains hundreds of formulas for the scientific method. They are basically the same but differ in length and terminology. In an article "Suggestions for Teaching the Scientific Method" published in the March 1961 issue of *American Biology Teacher*, Dr. Kenneth B.M. Crooks suggested this one:

Curiosity Is there a problem? Get the evidence Attributes needed Weigh all evidence Check for bias (who or what is not represented or served?) Make the educated guess (hypothesis) Challenge the hypothesis Get a conclusion Make logical inquiries Suspend judgment Deductive reasoning Interestingly enough, it was Albert Einstein who said; "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we

currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create" (Wikipedia-Knowledge)

This element of imagination may be one of the distinguishing characteristics between Religion and Science and often used to separate and polarize these two important human developments.

As we move from the Christmas season into the new year, the birth story of the Nativity

continues to unfold into the season of "epiphany"

Epiphany is most commonly known by the Christian feast celebrating the manifestation of the divine nature of Jesus to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi.

January 6, this feast is traditionally observed.

However, the word "Epiphany" has broad implications for the religious life and "what we know to be true". An Epiphany is a revelatory moment, an experience of awareness- that results in special knowledge, a sudden realization of the manifestation of the holy. The Oxford dictionary describes Epiphany as A sudden manifestation of the essence or

meaning of something. A comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization:

Frank Maier: "I experienced an epiphany, a spiritual flash that would change the way I viewed myself"

Both Revelations and Epiphanies share similar qualities with what is described by philosophy as "existential moments"- when we encounter information in such a way profound, life altering realization that it shifts or greatly deepens our sense of meaning and purpose,

A fleeting moment of revelation can have long lasting effects upon our sense of being and action in the world.

However, Epiphany carries with it a responsibility that personal existential moments may not.

Epiphany represents a responsibility to reveal the divine nature or the holy once it is comprehended.

The Church observes a variety of Epiphany rituals and traditions. In places throughout Europe and Latin America, Christians commemorate Three Kings' Day by offering prayers, burning herbs that have been dried and blessed, sprinkling entryways with holy water."

Many Protestant Churches observe an Epiphany celebration that extends to [Ash Wednesday](#). The tradition of Twelfth Night, which marks the end of the [Christmas season](#), occurs the night before Epiphany. On this night, Kings' Cakes are baked in preparation for the coming winter season.

While living for a short time in New Orleans, I was invited into the annual ritual of eating "King's Cakes". What I discovered is that a plastic "Baby Jesus" is baked into each King Cake, a ring of sweet dough like bread with green and purple sprinkles and a bit of frosting. If you are lucky enough to get the slice with the baby, you are the next host or hostess of a King Cake party....and the celebration continues right up to Martigras.

Many Protestants mark Epiphany by taking down Christmas trees and burning them in bonfires. In Central Europe "star singers". Children dress as the three kings go caroling from door to door carrying a large star. In reward, they receive money or sweets, which often go to church charities and relief organizations.

The revelation of divine truth and the experience of "Epiphany" are not confined to the Christian tradition or story.

The moment of awakening experienced by Siddhartha Gautama; known as Nirvana;

Moses' experience of awe and reception of the ten commandments ; The Prophet Mohammad's reception and writing of the Koran; all give us insight into "Ways of knowing" that are not confined to what is...but rather what can be....

Perhaps Epiphany can best be applied by us in our life time as The prophetic art of imagination, revelation and manifestation of good in a world where "bad news" seems to carry the day.

Barbara Brown Taylor, "What's New?" *Christian Century*, 5/30/06

There is always tragedy somewhere, as the news reminds us so well. But there is not always tragedy everywhere, which the news does not make quite so clear. The good news is that where ferries are going down, brave people are diving into water to lift thrashing children to safety. Where crops are failing, generous people are providing relief for farmers and migrant workers, and where a [disappears], an entire community is turning out to hunt clues, post flyers, cook food and keep watch with the family.

Meanwhile, there are entire towns where nothing terrible is happening, where parents are

caring for children with remarkable tenderness, where nurses are tending patients, mail carriers are delivering packages, and at least one person is taking off work early to coach a youth soccer team. Terrible things will continue to happen, which the best efforts of people will not be sufficient to prevent, but bursts of gratuitous kindness are the mustard seeds from which healing bushes sometimes grow. They constitute the alternate reality that I want to live in, even if it means limiting my exposure to other kinds of news.

When I resist the economy and despair of the dominant world in which I live, I resist from a minority viewpoint that I learned in church. In that alternate reality, which operates on the divine economy, human beings are worth more than what they can buy or sell, and suffering breaks open as many hearts as it breaks down. There are many kinds of evangelism, I know, but here is one I can embrace: in a culture of fear, addicted to the bad news of sin and death, to keep telling stories of human kindness and divine grace--without commercials of any kind. In a world like ours, the church may be the only corporate sponsor that can afford to deliver such good news for free.

Buddha told a parable in a sutra: A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine.

The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

Buddhist scripture reinforces this moment of both awareness and choice with these words:

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought: It is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or act with an evil thought, pain will follow. If one acts with a pure thought, happiness follows." Therefore, let the wise one guard his thoughts." Reference from Buddhist Scripture: Analects and the Doctrine of the Mean; selected from Great Companions edited by Robert French Leavens, Beacon Press 1927.

Later writings from Christian Gospels echo Buddhist's teachings in Paul's Epistle to the Philippians- Christian Gospels

"Think on these things. Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely and good; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" If Epiphany is the manifestation and calling attention to the holy- it clearly seems to involve a certain amount of choice in how one will first perceive events and then act.

In preparation for this New Year sermon, I noticed a catchy article entitled "Intelligent Optimists" in bright yellow spread across the front page of a magazine entitled Ode. The whole of the edition was dedicated to pointing out 25 individuals, who are working to create a better tomorrow. Their stories vary, but each one seems to first have assessed events within their realm of influence and made choices to manifest something good in spite of the odds and the state of the world's affairs.

One story stands out from the rest. Its origins were

Inspired by children playing with a lop-sided soccer ball:

Just Do It

What if you live in a slum in one of Africa's big cities and you can't afford to buy a soccer ball? You make one for yourself of course, tying plastic bags together with a piece of rope. This invention (inspired) and symbolizes the ethos of Afrigaget- a group blog devoted to using African ingenuity to solve everyday problems. The photo was taken in Kibera, one of the continent's largest slums, located in Nairobi, Kenya. It appears on the site with these words

"When you have nothing, anything is possible."

An epiphany is not only an experience of personal revelation and inspiration, but results in action that can exponentially inspire others and bring about transformation. Epiphany is about changing the way we perceive and experience the world.

It requires an effort to shift our consciousness, to give notice to those events which encourage hope and possibility.

This important shift in awareness is noted by Henry David Thoreau:

"After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what-how-when and where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight."

Epiphany reminds us that we are not here for ourselves alone.

In the words of Social reformer Jane Addams

" It is well to remind ourselves, from time to time that "ethics" is but another word for "righteousness" , that for which many men and women of every generation have hungered and thirsted and without which life becomes meaningless.

To attain individual morality in an age demanding social morality, to pride one's self on the results of personal effort when the times demand social adjustment, is utterly to fail to apprehend the situation. All about us are (those) who have become unhappy in regard to their attitude toward the social order itself."

We are learning that a standard of social ethics is not attained by traveling a sequestered byway, but by mixing on the thronged and common road where all must turn out for one another and at least see the size of one another's burdens.

To follow the path of social morality results in the temper, if not the practice of the democratic spirit for it implies diversified human experience and results in sympathy which are the foundations and guarantee of democracy."

We have inherited a faith tradition that affirms our human capacity to learn and grow;

As a people, we are called to fulfill a greater good that can and will exceed any of our personal limitations.

Here at the threshold of yet another new year, but a critical one....we are called to reflect

upon the past in order to give shape to our collective future.

Given what we know....What will we do and how?

Let us follow the return of the light with a serious season of reflection and discernment. Let

these winter days inspire us to listen and perceive great possibility so both Revelation and Epiphany will be alive and well in us and in our ministry.

Benediction:

"The fires of the old year are past.

Some see only ashes scattered upon barren ground.

We come to affirm life and discover new possibilities.

We bring with us our strong will to love and to do justice.

Together we will tend the embers of hope and wisdom

and rise up to meet the challenges before us;

To the end that each shall know wholeness and all will live as one"

So may it be, Shalom, Amen