
Just is Joy!

An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith Epiphany 1 – Year A

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and our redeemer. Amen. —Psalm 19:14 (adapt.)

One of my mentors in our Episcopal Church tradition taught me something that connects with our observance today. Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, which we celebrated on Friday. Friday was January 6, which is always the twelfth day Christmas if you count the day after Christmas, the 26th, as the first day of Christmas. And so it was that Friday night, that evening of January 6, bears the same name as the title of Shakespeare's famous comedy, the play, Twelfth Night. I'll say more about such traditions as Twelfth Night in a moment. But here's what my mentor told me was one of the reasons he loved the Episcopal Church or our Anglican heritage.

By the way, he was an African American priest, the Rev. Charles Taylor the elder, and when I was a seminarian we liked to joke about the irony of a black priest so in love with Anglican Church traditions. In fact he himself, I believe, would be satisfied to smile at the label we give such black Episcopalians who share such passion for our Anglican lore and pageantry: instead of Anglo-Saxons we called them "Afro-Saxons"—that's right: Afro-Saxons!

"The reason I'm happy to be Anglican," he told me, "is that there's always more to learn in this church." He said he knew that he would die still learning; that he wouldn't live long enough to learn it all. And that's what I'm experiencing today, on this first Sabbath after the Epiphany.

The word "epiphany" means manifestation; manifestation or revelation or disclosure. The root of the word "epiphany" is *phanein*: it's the same root as in the word "phenomenon;" phenomenon meaning that which appears, shines out, makes itself known. And of course what makes itself known in our Epiphany celebration is the manifestation of the Christ child. On Epiphany day we celebrate that manifestation of the infant Jesus to the magi—to the three wise men who traveled all the way from the mysterious East to follow the Star of Bethlehem. As it came to rest over the birthplace of Jesus he was made him known to them as the promised Messiah of the Jews. But here's what I learned this Epiphany that reminds me what my mentor taught me.

I learned that the Christmas and Epiphany seasons of our church traditions share some of the same joy and festivity as the Pre-Lent and Easter seasons of our church year. I mean specifically the King Cake tradition and the hilarity and foolishness of some of our Easter traditions. Here's what I mean.

A king cake (sometimes [called] ... king's cake or three king's cake) is a type of cake associated in a number of countries with the festival of Epiphany at the end of the Christmas season; in other places, it is associated with the pre-Lenten celebrations of Mardi Gras/Carnival...

[On Epiphany, however] The cake often has a small plastic baby (to represent the [Baby Jesus](#)) inside or underneath; and the person who gets the piece of cake with the trinket has various privileges and obligations.

[King cake - Wikipedia](#)

Now as you may recall, Mardi Gras or Carnival is the day that begins the 40 days of Lent, where we fast from pleasures in preparation for Easter. So before fasting we feast during Mardi Gras—as in “Fat Tuesday,” and in Carnival we indulge in the kind of pleasures that we abstain from during Lent. In this way baking and exchanging cakes—cakes in honor of “King Jesus”—can serve to celebrate both the Lent-Easter season and the Christmas-Epiphany season.

But there’s another feature of the Christmas-Epiphany season that I learned about for the first time around this time. It’s the foolishness and hilarity traditions that relate to our scriptures appointed in the Episcopal church for today.

In the Middle Ages ... The subdeacons (one of the "minor orders" that developed in the early church) objected that they had no feast of their own. So it became their custom to celebrate the "Feast of Fools" around January 1, often in conjunction with the feast of Christ's circumcision on that day [the so-called “Octave of Christmas” or 8th day when the law of Moses commanded male infants to be circumcised] (which was also one of the earliest feasts of the Virgin Mary, and is today celebrated as such by Roman Catholics) [or celebrated as Holy Family Sunday].

The twelve days of Christmas saw similar celebrations of the topsy-turvy and the unruly. A "Lord of Misrule" was often elected at Christmas and ruled the festivities until Epiphany. A schoolboy was traditionally chosen as bishop on December 6 (the Feast of St. Nicholas) and filled all the functions of bishop until Holy Innocents' Day. The Christmas season also sometimes saw the "Feast of the Ass," commemorating the donkey [which was] traditionally [represented at Jesus’ birth as being] present at the manger. On this day, people were supposed to bray like a donkey at the points in the Mass where one would normally say "Amen."

Can you imagine such a “topsy-turvy” church service—people braying like donkeys whenever they would normally be saying, “Amen!?” What pandemonium and chaos there would be! A holy hilarity would ensue, yes? —a kind of hilarity that turns the world upside-down. In fact it’s a hilarity more often associated with Easter; with such Easter features as “laughter Sunday” or the Easter laughter. Yet the basis for such laughing hysteria is our proclamation that by virtue of Jesus’ Easter resurrection “life has overcome death; fullness of life has taken over where there has death, destruction and domination. Moreover, as in Mary’s Magnificat, divine righteousness has overturned the status quo and the rich are sent empty away ...

[Now you can] ...dismiss all these customs as pagan survivals (which many of them are), or at best as irrelevant and harmless follies. Indeed, the medieval church frowned on most of these practices, and the Reformers of the 16th century finished the job of suppressing them.

[But we have the opportunity to retrieve ... in our time even today we need challenges to the powers that be ... to domination of the poor and powerlessness. ...the message of Christ turns the whole world upside down. In the birth of Jesus, God has put down the mighty from their seats and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

Nothing will ever be safe or normal again. In the words of Michael Card, we are called to "follow God's own fool."

We are part of the strange society of people whose world has been turned upside down, and we go out to witness to this topsy-turvy truth.

The Real 12 Days of Christmas, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/real-twelve-days-of-christmas.html>

So in this context notice how our scripture readings from Isaiah provide a personality profile of our Lord himself.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations ...he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching. Isaiah 42:1, 3b-4

Notice in a similar way this character profile of Lord found in our epistle appointed for today.

Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:34-43)

Finally our gospel reiterates the righteousness theme one last time!

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17)

Taken together these scriptures highlight the source of our hilarity in this season, in expectation of the phenomenal breakthrough into “Peace on Earth and Goodwill to All.” In this Epiphany season, to further that connection, we have three events that each provide a focus for our Epiphany season. Beginning with the Epiphany day itself—always January 6, the 12th day of Christmas, we have story of the three Magi, Kings, or wise men. That was the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ child to the shepherds as well as the Magi.

Then there’s our Lord’s baptism as we focused on today; where he is manifested as God’s “chosen” and as God’s own Son. Finally there is the manifestation of his turning water into wine at the Wedding at Cana. We’ll here about this miraculous event later in the Pentecost season, but thematically it belongs in our Epiphany season as a manifestation that prefigures our Eucharistic sacrament—the sacrament that transforms ordinary bread and wine into spiritual food for nourishing our own embodiment of Christ as our Way, our Truth, and our Life (“Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” –John 14:6).

But for us here today there is the hilarity of Jesus as our Lord of just rule and righteousness—whose righteousness outwits, outmaneuvers, and out-classes the powers-that-be. In the coming weeks ahead before Lent may we all have the grace and fortitude to keep a holy and hilarious Epiphany!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.