

## Epiphany and Transformation—Message for 3 January 2016

Greeting: W.H. Auden wrote in 1942 his Christmas Oratorio “For the Time Being” an epic poem of 1500 beautiful lines on the incarnation of the divine in the everyday. Here is a section on the wise men, characterizing each of the three, to recognize the celebration of Epiphany this week:

“To break down her defenses and profit from the vision  
That plain men can predict through an Ascesis of their senses  
With rack and screw  
I put Nature through a thorough inquisition  
But she was so afraid that if I were disappointed  
I should hurt her more that her answers were disjointed.  
I did, I didn’t, I will, I won’t.  
She is just as big a liar, in fact, as we are  
To discover how to be truthful now is the reason I follow this  
star.

My faith that in Time’s constant flow lay real assurance  
Broke down on this analysis, At any given instant  
All solids dissolve, No wheels revolve  
And feats have no endurance.  
And who knows if it is by design or inadvertence  
That the present destroys its inherited self importance?  
With envy, terror, rage, regret,  
We anticipate or remember but never are  
To discover how to be living now is the reason I follow this  
star.

Observing how myopic is the Venus of the Soma  
The concept ought would make, I thought  
Our passions philanthropic  
And rectify in the sensual eye Both lens and lenscoma

But arriving at the greatest good by introspection  
And counting the greatest number left not time for affection  
Laughter, kisses, squeezes, smiles  
And I learned why the learned are despised as they are  
To discover how to be loving now is the reason I follow this  
star.”

First hymn from the blue book number 68, “Brightest and Best  
of the Stars of the Morning” The beautiful words reflect at  
Epiphany the same sentiments of the Christmas hymn “In the  
Bleak Midwinter” in recognizing the link of humble and divine.

The great mystical poet, printer, and painter William Blake,  
who at age 8 saw a tree filled with angels and constantly  
perceived the world in symbolic form wrote this poem in the  
late 18<sup>th</sup> century as part of the Songs of Innocence:

### The Divine Image

To Mercy Pity Peace and Love.  
All pray in their distress:  
And to these virtues of delight  
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy Pity Peace and Love,  
Is God our father dear:  
And Mercy Pity Peace and Love,  
Is Man his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart  
Pity, a human face:  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,  
That prays in his distress,  
Prays to the human form divine  
Love Mercy Pity Peace,

And all must love the human form.  
In heathen, turk or jew,  
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,  
There God is dwelling too.”

From Luke 9:28-29 “About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John, and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightening.” And in Mark 9: 2-3 “After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.” Finally in Matthew 17: 1-2 “After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.”

We opened with a hymn on the traditional story of epiphany, and now have a hymn that touches some Quaker epiphanies, no. 195 in the green book “Wear It as Long as You Can”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—Every year, every day, every hour we seek the transformation, the ways in which the Divine Truth of things can infuse our lives and actions. We invoke deep blessings and

Light on those mentioned and those in our hearts today, as well as those in need unknown to us. Bless this year the captive and the refugee, bless those targeted unjustly by police and social disdain. Bless the humble and lowly, as did the wise men, the mystics, scientists, and kings, and all those hurt by war. Bless us to see the transfiguration of the Christ within, a shining brilliance of the inner light, and not just a little candle flame. In that Light let us remember the angels, remember the star. See the angels who tell us, and see the star that guides us. Amen

Our third hymn is “There are Angels Hov’ring Round” no. 203 in the green.

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other, to nurture each other with lessons and play in community.

Message:

Dear Friends—In that last hymn, as in the visions of William Blake, there is that imminence, that just-on-the-edge feeling of the Divine about to burst forth in the New Jerusalem, those angels hovering around. Will we see and hear them, just when they, and we, are so needed? How long can we stay in the regular ways of the world—how long can we wear those ways in a world that needs transformation, needs brilliant light?

We know we are living at a time of a collapse of the old social consensus, at a time of conflict and crisis and emergency, but also at a time of emergence. The turning of the age demands wisdom, a collective wisdom that we know how to find. Auden wrote from the depths of the bloody twentieth century of three wise men who see they must leave the exploitation of nature, their foolish faith in constant progress, and cold technical and rational analysis in order to embrace truth, life, and love. To

follow a star to the brightest and best, where gifts and exchange of things are not the ways to find favor and attention and truth, even though offered with sincerity. That in the blinding light of true Holiness, only humility can stand.

Blake wrote as the capitalist age emerged, fully a century after Quakerism, in the shocking world of slavery and new global levels of violence and exploitation. His songs of innocence and of experience were composed to show the two contrary states of the human soul not as conventional opposites, but something more dynamic and mystical in a reverberating spiritual universe like the ocean of darkness and ocean of Light. He explicitly extols the non-market values of mercy, pity, peace, and love as the essence of the Divine and as the expressions of the divine in all humans.

“For Mercy has a human heart  
Pity, a human face:  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.”

In his old age, Blake explained his inspiration by saying, “What, “ it will be Questioned, “when the Sun rises do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a Guinea?” Oh no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God almighty.”

Bryan Stevenson is a contemporary African American lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, a MacArthur Genius and Harvard grad who wrote the recent bestseller *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. He states, “When I stepped into this world, I saw that we were all burdened by a certain kind of indifference to the plight of poor people. We were burdened by an insensitivity to a legacy of racial bias. We were

tolerating unfairness and unreliability in a way that burdened me and provoked me. The book is an effort to confront this burden.” He goes on to say, “The greatest evil of American slavery was not involuntary servitude but rather the narrative of racial differences we created to legitimate slavery. Because we never dealt with that evil, I don’t think slavery ended in 1865, it just evolved.”

Blake saw it coming, Stevenson identifies it now, that systems based in greed, fear, anger, and desperation cannot have positive outcomes. Our faith demands that in speaking truth to power, we not comply with such systems. And yet love and hope have their own systems at the same time. Jeremy Corbyn, the very unlikely new leader of the labor party in England said this past week when asked if he’s ever been fearful taking on the powerful, “There’s two points here, really. One is that I have this 18<sup>th</sup> century religious view that there is good in everybody. Sometimes you have to search quite hard for it. Sometimes it’s very hard to find and you wonder if it really is there. Secondly, because I’ve never had any higher education of any sort, I’ve never held in awe those who have had it or have a sense of superiority over those who don’t. Life is life. Some of the wisest people you meet are sweeping the streets.”

So in all these concerns and messages of hope, the central reading is the transfiguration. As humans, we make stories to make sense of things. And in the Gospels, the life of Jesus becomes that human thing, a story that is filled with meaning and lingers in our hearts this time of year. As humans living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century after the start of that story, we must travel far to follow that star. Yet the moment of the Transfiguration reminds us that God and the power of the Divine, that mystical presence, that transcendent truth and joy goes way beyond stories. It is there, hovering around and bursts forth with such

brilliance. We can see some of its power and eminence in a few of the stories and quotations I've shared, but it means so much more in our own experience. As the Gospel of John says, "We have beheld the glory" Can we ready ourselves to let love be our guide in the year to come? Can we pray together on that mountaintop in hope and support and see the Divine?

I noticed during meeting that the medallion in our ceiling, about which I've spoken as a wheel, can also be seen as a star, with the hub, perhaps, as a bright shining sun. Final hymn is number 180 "There is Nothing I can Give You"

Closing: Yes, take peace and joy and heaven. W.H. Auden also wrote in "For the Time Being": "Blessed Woman, Excellent Man. Redeem for the dull, the average way. That common, ungifted natures may believe that their normal vision can walk to perfection....unto you a Child, a Son is giv'n, praising, proclaiming the ingression of Love. Earth's darkness invents the blaze of heaven and frigid silence meditates a song; For great joy has filled the narrow and the sad, while the emphasis of the rough and big, the abiding crag and wandering wave is on forgiveness: Sing glory to God, goodwill to all and all, all, all of them run to Bethlehem. Let us run to learn how to love and run. Let us run to Love."

Thanks/Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude