

## Epiphany: Loving Life's Mosaic

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In the midst of a great darkness, we awake to find joy!

Many Christians celebrate this Sunday, the first Sunday following January 6, as Epiphany Sunday, from the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning to *shine forth*, a *manifestation* or a *revealing*.

January 6 commemorates the epiphany of the Magi when the star leads them to the baby Jesus, and Epiphany Sunday celebrates Jesus' own epiphany at baptism. In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus' time, an epiphany refers to the appearance of a god to mortals. For Christians who follow the lectionary, this six-week liturgical period begins with Jesus' epiphany and culminates in the celebration on February 14 of Jesus' transfiguration, then transitions to the Lenten season.

If you're curious how gospels describe Jesus' experiences of epiphany, connection with the ground of all being, come join UU Bible study the next five epiphany Sundays. Epiphanies happen in the midst of life's messiness. Our own epiphanies come to us unexpectedly, perhaps after a period of great stress, and owe as much to the problems of our lives as to our own blessedness.

Some of you have heard me recount my first epiphany, as a teenager on a Baptist youth retreat sitting too long in a stuffy room, then dashing out into the bright forest sunlight, to find all the trees alive and full of light, and my own body glowing with light energy. I'll never forget my first epiphany, though deep meditation and many vision quests have brought me further dream experiences of angels, conversations with the ground of all being, and other mysterious happenings that qualify as revealing manifestations. Every human life is a mystery.

We find epiphanies in the midst of solitude or in our community. They shine forth from our tangled emotions and our impossible relationships, or even the endless failures of our lives. Epiphanies aren't separate but are experienced in the midst of living. Paula Dietz reminds us that life-changing events can bring us to joy or to the brink of despair, whether through the death of a loved one, financial disaster, a nasty divorce, a new job, moving to a new home or country, suffering accident or disease, falling in or out of love, or watching a sunrise. The list is endless and unpredictable.

Not all life-changing events result in epiphany, but few epiphanies occur without some adversity and struggle. Life changes us, epiphanies result from our experiences; whether awake or in a dream state, we are never the same.

That is why I love the story of poor Jacob, my namesake, who does everything wrong yet is transformed by his experiences while fretfully sleeping in the wilderness. Jacob's story takes a quarter of the book of Genesis to describe. Jacob fought with his twin brother Esau while still in

their mother's womb, and even though Esau emerged first, making him the elder brother, we are told that Jacob was born clutching his brother's heel.

As young men Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright as the eldest son. Then when their father Isaac lay dying, Jacob pretended to be Esau so that he could claim their father's deathbed blessing. One doesn't need to have grown up as an elder brother to understand why Esau wanted to kill his younger brother.

Jacob ran away, and finding only a stone for a pillow in the wilderness, he had an extraordinary epiphany of God: a ladder with angels ascending and descending, and God promising to be with him always and make of him a great people. When he awakes, what does Jacob promise God? He vows: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth back to you."

This by the way is the first tithe in the Bible. As a result of his epiphany, Jacob makes God a deal, and you might think that with God on his side that all will be well. But, if so, you clearly haven't read the Bible.

We are told that Jacob's grandfather Abraham had one wife and many concubines. At his death, Abraham gave everything he had to his one legitimate son Isaac and sent his many other children out into the wilderness. Isaac's half brother Ishmael, we are told, had enough offspring to populate many tribes and villages to the east. Jacob's twin, Esau, also went on to father a whole tribe of descendants. And we're told Esau married into Ishmael's family, uniting all those tribes in opposition to Jacob.

Jacob has lots of cousins, nephews, and nieces to fear in this wilderness. Jacob made his way east to Uncle Laban, his mother's brother, an Aramean, in order to find a wife. Jacob fell in love with his cousin Rachel, Laban's daughter, but Laban tricked him into working seven years and then married him to his oldest daughter Leah. So Jacob worked seven additional years in order to also marry Rachel. Having two young wives, Jacob goes on to have twelve sons of his own, and then several of *them* sell *his* favorite son to a traveling caravan. But that is another story for another time. Let's just say epiphanies, much less conversations with the Almighty, don't necessarily result in a blessed or even a simple life.

After Laban cheated Jacob many times, Jacob cheated Laban as well. Then Jacob's wife Rachel stole Laban's household gods, and Jacob's whole tribe fled back to his father Isaac's land. When Laban caught up with them they made a new covenant with God and each other, and so Laban blessed them on their way.

Jacob was greeted again in the wilderness by angels of God. Yet he prayed: "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good.' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my (walking) staff I crossed the (river) Jordan; and now I have become two (large families). Deliver me,

please, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers and the children. Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'”

Then Jacob slept alone that night in the wilderness, and wrestled with God, which left him forever transformed in body and soul, such that thereafter he limped and henceforth was known as Israel; that is, one who strives with God. And his offspring came to be known as Israel, the ones who strive with God. Marking this as a holy place, Jacob said, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

Jacob’s life represents a rich mosaic of living. He strives, he tricks, he cheats, and he is cheated. He loves deeply, and fears for his life, yet is open to recognizing the presence of God in the midst of his struggles and anxiety.

Each of our lives also represents our own rich mosaic of experience. I grew up in a small Rhode Island town, earnest, smart, ambitious, risk taking, you might color that my brown period.

I had a very rocky time in college: my hand torn open on a riot gate, a failed engagement, poor grades, you could color that my blood red period.

After falling in love with Loretta, I graduated, earned an honors degree from Harvard Business School, we had two wonderful children, while I worked as an international strategy consultant. This perhaps was my green period.

Then as I built companies, life intruded, with my brother David’s death after a long battle with AIDS, my father’s death from lymphoma, followed shortly by the death of a company I had founded and built. Loretta might call that my blue period. There is much suffering and pain in the world and none of us are immune to it.

My children grew into wonderful young adults, and I found new callings as a venture capitalist and a minister, perhaps in my purple period.

Then my daughter experienced life-threatening cancer, mononucleosis, chronic fatigue. My son graduated college, got married, and settled into a good job. Loretta and I emerged into strong and capable mature adulthood roles; perhaps our white period.

All of these experiences, both wonderful and horrible, are the raw materials from which we make meaning. These are the materials from which we construct the mosaic that is our life.

What are the colors of your own life’s mosaic? Perhaps you have more bright colors than I do, or perhaps you have longer, darker periods. Each human life is a mystery. My life has been mostly formed with strong bold colors, reflecting a whole range of a light spectrum, and including both deep joy and deep sorrow. How is your life? We are deeply blessed, and greatly troubled, and God is always present for all of us within our lives.

What would it be like for each of us to have even half of Jacob's problems and struggles, and yet to mark these as a holy place, and to thank God that our life has been preserved? Spiritual teachers tell us it is the way to make sense of our lives.

If you are like me, you probably grew up with the notion that good people go to heaven and see God, and naughty people go to hell and are eternally separated from God. However, that is not what is in the Bible. God never made such a promise, but perhaps it was our well-meaning parents who hoped that it would be so.

It seems that God's chosen ones -- Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and so on -- are forever having heated disagreements with God, or otherwise falling short of my mother's idea of what it means to be a good person, and yet they still record epiphanies, direct experiences of engagement with the ground of all being, and clearly have earned God's favor, despite the problems in their lives. Those who meekly follow all the rules never gain nearly so much.

So what can we make of this seeming Biblical injunction that we should dare to wrestle with God if we wish to see God?

It seems to be true in every field of human endeavor: the best mathematicians wrestle with the mathematical formulas rather than merely accept what their teacher tells them; the best scientists engage and disprove known theorems rather than simply accepting the status quo. Deeply striving seems to be a requirement for mastering any field or relationship.

And so it seems to be with spiritually advanced seekers in every tradition. Those who meekly accept the status quo can perhaps be good students but only those who will dare to wrestle God to the ground, and be thereby transformed by the effort, can emerge as great and understanding spiritual teachers.

We are co-creators of our lives in conjunction with the ground of all being. That isn't to say that we shouldn't be good, for goodness sake, but we shouldn't simply be good in order to please God, or to avoid hell, for the universe is not constructed along such simple lines.

My mother would like to know that I am being good. God seems to want to know that I am truly being engaged by my life. It may be easier to please my mother than it is to please God, but perhaps that is not as true for your mother?

As my spiritual director pointed out to me yesterday, in the gospel stories even Jesus struggles with God throughout the three years of his public ministry. We all struggle, but the deep joy that gets me up in the morning, which help me to transcend even the deepest tragedies of life, comes from those few moments of being engaged with the ground of being in my own life. I wouldn't trade these for anything, and I encourage you to live your life for epiphanies also.

Please don't tell your mother that your pastor said you don't need to be good. You should be good for its own sake, not for some heavenly reward or hellish penalty. When Jesus told his disciples that they needed to become like little children in order to experience the kingdom of

heaven, I am certain he wasn't saying he thought that little children always behaved better than grown adults, but rather that they are more closely attuned to experiencing reality directly, fully engaged in each and every moment of their young lives.

Please don't tell your father that your minister said you can cheat, scheme, lie, and trick people like Jacob did, for it is good to be a person of deep integrity in life. However, I do believe that daring to wrestle with angels in our lives -- even, or *especially* knowing we could receive a deep wound, or be otherwise transformed, as a result of such holy battle -- is a key to experiencing God.

The material we each have to work with is the rich dark mosaic of experiences in our own lives. We own the joy as well as the suffering, weaving together in community a rich tapestry of faith and love that is our lives. We have each been offered life eternal if we dare to claim our prize. I love you all dearly.

Blessed Be and Amen.