

Epiphany Happens

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KOINONIA

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Isaiah 60:1-9

In my sophomore year of high school I attended a rally in the gym that was dedicated to honoring the brightest minds among us. Teachers and students were honored that day. Some students were recognized for making the honor roll, some for excelling in a particular academic discipline, some for having excellent grades while excelling in an extra curricular activity like sports, theater or choir. Teachers won awards for various things too: best classroom outcomes, most supportive, stuff like that. Most rallies at my high school were focused on football and basketball games, so this particular one was different. It was all brain focused. I wasn't super excited about going because my grades were average at best and because I was an athlete in self-identity, I didn't appreciate the usurping of my gym for this geek fest.

As things started warming up the band came out and played some songs. The local dance troop did their thing. The various grade levels did their class cheers. I played along, bored stiff. And then certain members of the faculty did a "Wizard of Oz" skit, trying to help us think about the academic journey as one of self-actualization that involved much courage, heart and brain. Some of my teachers were dressed up in popular Oz roles like The Scarecrow and Wicked Witch of the West. It was fun to see them in costume, dancing around like fools. But there was a moment in the middle of the skit that I'll never forget. When Dorothy's character came into the scene, I had never seen the teacher playing her part. But there was something about her. Something stunning, something so alluring that I couldn't take my eyes off of her. It wasn't a physical beauty

thing though she was/is a beautiful woman: there was a way that she exuded joy that simply captivated me. She danced around and laughed at herself. She never stopped smiling and her eyes were shining bright enough for me to witness at the top of the bleachers on the other side of the room. She was nothing less than radiant. I asked the person next to me who she was and he told me her name was Stephanie Maccecca and that she taught AP English and Introductory Spanish.

Later on in the rally she won the award for teacher of the year, which was decided by student votes only. When she came out on the floor this time to receive her plaque by the student body president, she was no longer smiling. She was sobbing, like tears flowing all over her face. And they were tears of humility, tears that fall when you've been recognized and honored by something greater than yourself in ways you never expected. When asked to make a speech to the student body, she just cried into the microphone and said "I don't even have words. Thank you." I decided there and then that I was going to change Spanish teachers. I was enrolled in her class a week later.

I took every class I could with Stephanie Maccecca during my time at Claremont High School. Spanish, English, Contemporary Communications. She was the most dynamic teacher I ever had; she made us work our butts off but she rewarded hard work with praise that stuck in your brain and convinced you you were somebody. She loved being her, uniquely authentically her and as a female teenager I needed to see a woman who loved her smart, silly, and fiercely strong self. Her embodied self esteem taught me more about life than all her classroom curriculum combined. I went to her room just to talk sometimes, bearing gifts of coffee and scones in hopes of gleaning her humor and wisdom. I sought her advice on personal stuff. I asked for letters of recommendation from her when it came college time. I worshipped the ground she walked on.

She also threw me out of class on more than one occasion for being disruptive and I got in-school suspension for a week once when she caught me cheating and turned me into the principle. We had a real relationship. She saw me for the potential and trouble I was and was never afraid to respond accordingly. And I saw her for the life-saver she was. In my 20th year of life when I'd dropped out of college and my whole life had fallen apart over stupid choices I'd made, she was the person I called. And when I asked her if I was doomed to a life of failure and she told me "Emily, I knew the minute you stepped into my classroom that you were going to change the world and I've always believed that you'd be a writer"--when she uttered those words, she turned the tide and saved my life. There wasn't another human being on the planet in that moment that could have done for me what she did for me then.

I believe, that on the day she came bouncing out into the gymnasium with that stupid Dorothy costume on, red high heels and all, grinning from ear to ear, before I ever knew her name, before I'd ever taken her class--I believe in that moment when I was captivated by her, my soul had an epiphany. Something inside of me knew that this woman was going to be important in my life, that she would have a saving-role in my future. I couldn't possibly have articulated that knowing, that soulful recognition in the gym, but Epiphany's aren't really experiences you can articulate. They just stop you in your tracks, make you look closer and deeper, make you wonder and ask questions, make you travel to new places, make you bear gifts and seek counsel. Epiphanies are moments when something manifests and for some reason or another, we catch a glimpse and stand in the presence of the holy.

In the biblical text we heard this morning the establishment of Zion is the epiphany that causes light and glory to shine forth in the darkness. In the Gospels, it's the star in the sky above Jesus' head that causes light and glory to shine forth in the darkness. The first epiphany I can recall from my life

happened in my sophomore year of High School when I saw Stephanie Maccecca dressed up like Dorothy from Wizard of Oz, the day she won student-voted Teacher of the Year award. It's a day I'll never forget. But whether it's the establishment of Zion, a star in the sky over a newborn's head, or the best teacher in the world acting goofy in the gym: epiphanies are always moments in time when we catch a glimpse of a holy reality much larger than ourselves, one that will play a saving role in our lives.

Today is Epiphany Sunday for us in the Christian year. In biblical Koine Greek "epiphany" means striking appearance, manifestation, and vision of God. This is a day in our liturgical life when we honor that fact that God strikingly appears, God manifests, that we are able because of who God is how God does Divine Life to have visions of the Holy in our lives. Epiphany happens.

Epiphany happens.

But unfortunately I think many of us think Epiphany happened. Like once: with that star in the sky. Or maybe twice with the establishment of Zion. Okay, maybe three times with that whole burning bush thing. All back then. All grand in-breaking that changed the world forever. In the past. Long ago. Epiphany happened.

Epiphany didn't happen. It happens. It is in God's nature to strikingly appear, to manifest, to grant us visions of Her holy self. How many of us have had moments when something captured our attention? We had a premonition that the thing in front of us was going to have a big impact on our future? And then just as soon as we had that moment, we talked ourselves out of it? That's silly. That's just a star in the sky. There are plenty of stars in the sky. That doesn't mean anything. Oh come on: that's just a normal person. There are plenty of people in the world. What's so special about her? How many times do we tip-toe up to an epiphany, give ourselves a peak, but never stand in the full presence or catch a full glimpse of the holy because

we don't listen to our deepest knowing, our deepest intuition, our deepest yearning to have an encounter with the Living God who always shows up in ordinary things in extraordinary ways?

One of my favorite quotes that I read everyday because it's posted in my office is by Gabriel Marcel. He says "the effect of the incarnation is in fact to spread radiance." The point of the star in the East was to shine. The point of Zion in all her splendor was to be radiant for all nations. Epiphany is about shining bright, radiant splendor. Glory. Bursting beauty. I keep wondering what my life would be like if Stephanie Maccecca wasn't the shining light, the radiant splendor, the burst of glory that she chose to be in her day to day life. Like what if she played small or sat it out? Where would I be? Point is: sometimes you will be someone else's epiphany. Sometimes you will be the light in the sky; you will be Zion; you will be the teacher or coach or the self-loving gay person or thriving recovering addict or person of progressive faith that shows up in your ordinary life in extraordinary ways for someone else. You never know when a person who desperately needs it will catch a glimpse of the holy, will stand in the presence of life saving power in an encounter or relationship with you.

So this year, don't play small. Don't let any aspect of yourself go. Don't be afraid to burst forth, shine bright, to be radiant glory in all of who you are and how you live. Epiphany happens and it can happen through you. Amen.

