

## THE SERENDIPITY OF EPIPHANY

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My Christmas message today is “The Serendipity of Epiphany.” Preachers should never use a title you have to start the sermon to explain the title. Epiphany of course is the Greek orthodox word that’s used for the feast of Christmas. In the Greek church, the orthodox church calendar, January is on January 6<sup>th</sup>. We get out 12 days of Christmas, the time between the Roman Latin - Catholic Christmas, December 25<sup>th</sup> to the orthodox Christmas of January 6<sup>th</sup>.

Actually epiphany is a very good Bible word because it’s a word that’s used in the Greek New Testament to describe the coming of Christ. It’s a word that means manifestation, a word that means appearance. It’s used by Zechariah in his song celebrating the birth of John the Baptist when he says in Luke 1:9 “The Messiah will shine,” and the word is epiphany. He will epiphany on those living in darkness.

Then Paul uses the word “epiphany” to Titus when he talks about the coming of Jesus into the world. He says, “The grace of God which brings salvation has made an epiphany to all men.”

Therefore I will use the word “epiphany” today to describe those times when Christ especially becomes manifest to us.

The word “serendipity” is kind of a happy word. It’s come to stand for those unexpected surprises that happen to us in life. It actually comes out of a Persian story that told of the travels and the adventures of the three princes of Serendipity who were the sons of the king of the mystical land. These three sons and their adventures were always finding things either that were unexpected to themselves or unexpected to other people. For example one time they went out to help a leader of camels find his lost camel. They were able by reading the grass along side of the road to tell the leader of the camel what kind of a camel he had really had. He had had a blind camel in one eye because the grass on one side of the road was eaten more than the other side. They knew that the camel was missing some teeth because every piece of grass that he ate had a little bit of clump that was not eaten. They knew that the camel was lame because one foot had dragged along the grass. And they knew that the camel had carried butter on the one side and honey on the other because on the one side ants were feeding on the fat and on the other side flies were feeding on the sweets. They were princes who made unexpected discoveries. So serendipity comes to understand for the idea of finding valuable things unexpectedly. Coming upon unsought for discoveries.

There is a lot to Christmas that is serendipity. More than simply the manger, meaning to the manger. Meaning to the coming of Christ.

There are four serendipities of Christmas that I want to identify today.

One serendipity of course is that God came to earth in Jesus Christ. That’s very easy to say and we say it all the time. But take a moment to ponder and to wonder. God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. *National Geographic* magazine several years ago had a map, a fold out map of the universe. It beats me how anybody could draw a map of the universe but there are people that smart that know where all these things are. There in this tremendous map which by

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and large had stars rather than planets because planets are too smaller really, there was a little speck in that great big atlas of the universe, a little speck called earth.

That's where we are in time and space. Just a little speck. But we are everything to God. Because God sent his Son for us. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, described this coming of Jesus to the earth as a visit from God to his people, Luke 1:68. In Bible days as well as in contemporary days there are three kinds of ways that a person can visit, maybe more. But at least in the New Testament the word "visit" is used in three different ways.

It's used to describe a visit of a official with a right to inspect and to correct. For example a college goes through an accrediting process. Members of an accrediting association come and they have the right to ask questions ad a right to inspect and a right to correct. And woe be to the college that doesn't correct what they ask. If you own a restaurant the health department will come in. They have the right to inspect and to make corrections. Or a general visiting a military base comes on a visit of inspection and correction.

Likewise the eternal Son of God comes and as he grows to manhood he comes on this visit to see what is in the heart of man, to inspect. But to do more than that. To correct.

So he's on an official visit to earth.

But he's also on a family visit. Christmas is a time when we have family visits. Family reunions. How wonderful it is to be visited by family members. How wonderful it is if those relationships are good relationships. Sometimes family visits can be a trauma.

Jesus comes on a visit as to a family. He comes to his own. He comes to us. He comes to make us sons and daughters of God.

Then of course a visit as may be a visit of mercy. The visit to the poor and the needy. Jesus talks about "I was I prison, I was sick and you visited me." Luke 7:16 says that when Jesus did a miracle at Nain where he raised up the only son of a widow from the dead the response of the people was that God has visited his people. Jesus coming into the world was a coming of a visit to help and to assist. Because in God's presence we're all needy. None of us have the money or the power to buy salvation, to buy eternal life, to buy forgiveness of sins, to buy relationship with God. All of us stand in need. Jesus' visit is one to come on a visit of help.

So the epiphany, the first serendipity of epiphany is that Christ comes to earth. Shares with us his presence and gives us assistance.

A second serendipity of epiphany is when Christ is born in us. Christ must not only be born in Bethlehem, Christ must be born in us.

Ever since Jimmy Carter ran for president the word "born again," has been a very popular one in our culture. It's almost become common place and therefore trivialized.

When the football season starts and the team begins by loosing three games in a row and then they start winning they're said to be *born again*.

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When a movie star has several movies that flop and they finally gets a success then her career is *born again*.

We so easily trivialize the word. But we all need to be born again. We've been born once and given natural life. But in order to have eternal life we need the life of Jesus Christ dwelling in us. Which he is quite ready to come to us and do if we will invite him in. Christ born in us.

I have found as a Christian that not only is Christ born in me at conversion but all during my walk with Christ there is a need for Christ to continue to be born in me. Not being born in a regenerative sense but being born in the sense of a wakening some of the dimensions of my life that may get closed off to him. Our temptations at times is to be that of the innkeeper who let Jesus be born outside the center of our experience because some room in our life may already be full. Maybe our thought life is full and we do not want Christ invading a particular area of our thought life. Maybe we do not want him to be born in the area of where we're carrying our heart or hurt or a grievance or a bitterness against someone else. But he wants to be born there. We need to open up every room of our life, every nook and cranny of our life to the presence of Jesus and cry out at Christmas as at every time of the year, "Lord Jesus! Be born in me. I need you to be born in this particular dimension of my life as well."

All through his earthly life Jesus kept making epiphany. Kept making appearances to his disciples. He epiphanies to them in storm, in quarreling and in conflict, in unbelief, in death, in fear. And he does that for us as well. He comes to us when we need him.

He comes to us when we need his correction. He comes to us when we need his encouragement. Christ born in us.

A third serendipity of epiphany is that Jesus also appears to us when we die. That may seem kind of a strange thing to raise at Christmas. But yet that is part of the coming of Christ. He knows that we live in the land of the shadow of death. He knows that death hangs as a specter over everyone of us. And that the date of that going into eternity is approaching. Therefore he comes into the world in order to give us himself as a means of bringing us out of this world into his world. He meets us in death.

As pastor I am keenly conscious that while Christmas is a very celebrative time for many families, at the same time it maybe the most depressing time of the year as well. Where one family, the circle is united, another family the circle has been broken by death or by other reasons. We need to know the underlying reality of why Christ came – to save us from sin and from death.

Several years ago one of our church family was lying at death's door in a hospital room, given hours, at the most days to live, slipped in and out of a coma. I happened to come to his room just as he had awakened from a coma and he was very alert. As events proved it would be the last time he would be alert. I wanted to pray for him, not only for his healing but also to talk with him about eternal realities. I think any person who believes in healing is always caught between those two things – praying for healing but at the same time having an honest talk with the person about where they are with the Lord that's facing something as overwhelming as death. So we talked very openly and very frankly. I was concerned because had been a very quiet person and had never really declared his faith. He had the assurance that he indeed knew the Lord and was ready to meet him.

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In trying to minister to him I said, if the Lord is going to call you home at his time let me tell you what's ahead. You're going to have an experience. The Lord rolls back the curtain of eternity and lets us see what that experience is like when the first Christian, Stephen, dies. Acts 7, as he is dying he looks up and he sees the heavens opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. I said to him, when Jesus first went into heaven the Bible says he was seated. But when we read of the first believer dying the Bible says Jesus was standing. That's the kind of thing that I do when someone comes into the room. If someone important comes into the room we stand up. And in eternity Jesus stands to meet us and greet us as we come. Jesus was standing to meet Stephen. I said, You will see the Lord. He is ready to meet you if this is your time.

So we prayed and the when we were through praying I said to him probably one of the stupidest and dumbest things I have ever said to anyone at a time of absolute seriousness when we both had tears in our eyes. But at the moment it just happened so naturally that we both smiled at one another. It was kind of a parting between us. The last thing I ever said to him because within an hour or two he was in a coma again and then shortly after that he was with the Lord. I said, And by the way when you see Jesus tell him hello for me.

I thought afterwards, theologically that is so out of it. I say hello to the Lord every day. Why did I say that? Yet there was this sense of passing.

I see him but not with physical eyes. But my friend would shortly see him with physical eyes.

Jesus came into our world to bring us into his world while there is a beautiful splendor about Christmas and the emphasis is upon birth, Jesus in his birth came because he was anticipating how much we were unprepared to face death. He was born to help us face death and eternity.

Then a fourth serendipity of his epiphany is that Jesus is returning.

I trust that this would be before any of us would need to go by way of death. But he is coming again. Paul puts this theme of the serendipity of epiphany together very nicely in Titus 2. He says in verse 11 "The grace of God that brings salvation has epiphanized to all men." Then two verses later in verse 13 he talks about a second epiphany. "While we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious epiphany. The glorious appearing of our great God and savior Jesus Christ."

Christians I think are meant to live in the wonder even before his return. When I think of that kind of wonder and simplicity, I'm drawn to the wonder and simplicity of children on Christmas Eve. I think that the Spirit that I see in children on Christmas Eve is kind of the expectancy which we as believers need to have every day of our lives as we approach the glorious epiphany and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Once I hit about 30, Christmas Eve didn't have quite the ring to it than when I was a kid. Now it's giving gifts to others. That's the fun. I don't really need anything. All I need are improvements in relationships. I don't need things, gifts. Most of you are like that. But being a kid at Christmas time, the joy and the expectancy of that. That's fun.

When I was a kid, no one opened gifts until Christmas morning. When I was about nine years of age, mom and Dad were home from the mission field and they were pastoring a small church in Pennsylvania. There wasn't a lot of money in the household that year because the folks were

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catching up from some time of unemployment. Dad was pastoring this small church and working full time in the post office. I had my heart set on an electric football set. The reason I guess why was I was the youngest child in our home and home alone. We moved a lot so I didn't have many close friends. Therefore I had a lot of time where I had to entertain myself. I liked to play games where I could play against myself and not cheat. So an electric football game seemed like I would have a great time and pass a lot of hours of fun.

So I let my parents know since they didn't believe in Santa Claus. Dad said we just don't have the money this year. We'd like to. They discouraged me.

But when Christmas morning came and all the gifts had been opened. Dad I guess could see the disappointment on my face. He said, There's one last gift. It's in the closet. You'd better go get it and bring it out.

There was my electric football set. That was the happiest Christmas. I've played with that thing. I've still got it! And it still works.

When we were first married, my wife had a garage sale. I walked in and saw my electric football set out for sale. She didn't know how much meaning I had wrapped up in that thing. That almost caused a divorce early in our marriage.

When George was about nine years of age I thought he must be wanting an electric football set too. So I went out and got a brand new one. I think he played two or three times and that was it. It just sets there unused.

But my set has a magical quality about it because it was something that was really wanted. Scripture says, "Unto them that look for him will he appear a second time."

I want to live with a child like wonder as I always lived every day on the edge of eternity. Is this the day Christ that you will come for me? Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

My dreams of going to meet the Lord throughout my life have not been that good. The first dream I ever had of the Lord returning I was left behind. I was a kid of ten. That shocked me into the kingdom of God.

Other dreams I've had. A few years ago I had a dream that the Lord returned. I knew he had returned and that everybody was going to be lifting off simultaneously. I started to lift off quietly and slowly. You could feel the thrust. I was two or three feet off the ground and I was saying to myself, there's been a mistake. They're going to find out and I'm going to drop! I didn't drop. I got about rooftop high, about 10-12 feet up in the air and I looked down and thought, It's going to hurt when they drop me. When I got about a 1000 feet up in the air I said, It's *really* going to hurt when they drop me. I got about a mile up in the air and I had been going long enough now and it couldn't have been a mistake or they wouldn't have let me go this far. I was going to be with the Lord. I got so excited that I woke up shouting, I made it!

There are a lot of things at Christmas I want to shout about. I want to shout, He came! It really is good news of great joy. Joy to the world the Lord has come. Joy to the word, Christ has come. We're caught up in that because his coming has significance for us. It means that we're born into the family of God. It means that we because of his indwelling presence in us prepared

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for life, prepared for death, prepared for eternity. Serendipity of epiphany. Serendipity of the glory of Christmas.

Is Christ born to you in Bethlehem? Is he to you an historical figure? Have you still got him in the realm of Santa Claus? Or is he real? The eternal Son of God. Has he been born in your life, born in every room of your life? Maybe the rooms right now that you're struggling with as a person, maybe even as a Christian, you're struggling to accept things, is Christ born in your responses? Is Christ going to appear to you in death or at his coming?

The serendipity of epiphany is a yes to all of those questions. Christ is born Bethlehem. Christ is born in me this day. Christ will appear to me in death. Christ is coming for me and for you.

Father, we thank you for the glory, the beauty, the meaning of Christmas. You have come. Epiphany. Thank you that you not only come to Bethlehem but thank you that you've come to our home, as well. Thank you that you've come to our hearts. Thank you for the rescue mission you came on to save us from this dying planet that one day will be lost in the darkness of space. Thank you for bringing us your life and the assurance that whoever believes in you will live and abide forever. All the beauty of every Christmas that we've ever experienced in our life is but a little spoon full compared to the glory that is coming when we see you. Thank you for coming for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.