

God Is with Us

Luke 3:21, 22

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We are in the season of the church year known as Epiphany. “The word epiphany means, literally, ‘a showing’....It traditionally falls on January 6 and celebrates the ‘showing’ of the infant Christ to the Eastern sages in Bethlehem....”¹ During this Season of Epiphany, of “showing”, we come to the baptism of our Lord, that day when God showed something. Jesus was baptized, “And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.” The showing that took place when Jesus was baptized involved not simply God showing, it involved God saying. “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

The story of the kings traveling from the east who are shown the infant Christ and the day by the waters of the Jordan when heaven was open and the Holy Spirit showed up like a dove are treasured demonstrations of God showing God’s self. In her thoughtful essay about Epiphany Luci Shaw tells of a way God showed God’s self to her. She was living in the Pacific Northwest, and her daily commute of 60 miles took her within a few miles of the majestic Cascade Mountains. If you know anything about the Pacific Northwest you will be aware that it is known for its rains that fall steadily. With the rains are clouds that hug the earth and as Luci Shaw writes, “They shroud the landscape in a gentle gloom.”

“For weeks I’ve driven my highway, sixty miles north in the morning, then south again at the end of the day. The mountains are clearly marked on the map, but they might as well not exist, lost as they are in the clouds, obscured by drizzle, fog, haze. Then, some morning, unexpectedly, a strong air from the sea will lick away the fog and allow the sun to shine cleanly. And Mt. Baker, towering magnificently beyond the foothills, unbelievably high above the other mountains, is seen to be what it has been all along—immense, serene, unmovable, its dazzling, snow-draped profile cut clear against the sky of jewel blue.

¹ Luci Shaw, *Epiphanies: Stories for the Christian Year*, edited by Eugene Peterson and Emilie Griffin, 50, 51.

Today it happened. The mountain ‘came out’! I kept turning my eyes from the highway to look once more at its splendor, wanting to be overwhelmed again and again. It is heart-stopping. I can’t get enough of it. And I can never take it for granted—I may not see it again for weeks. It’s God, showing me a metaphor of himself. I mean—he’s there, whether I see him or not. It’s almost as if he’s lying in wait to surprise me. And the wind is like the Spirit, sweeping away my foggy doubt, opening my eyes, revealing the reality of God.”²

The readings that are placed before us in the lectionary are aptly selected as they strip the clouds from the mountain and reveal God to us. Psalm 29 tells us the voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning. The voice of the Lord shakes the desert, twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. Apparently the psalmist was well acquainted with the God of Genesis whose spoken word called all of creation into being. This one had an intimate knowledge of the God of the Exodus who parted the Red Seas and resided among the thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai.

Our lectionary passages tell us not only of the God of Genesis and Exodus. We also hear from the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah, as in all the prophets whose words are influenced by the exile, that dark and lonely time when Israel was captured and led far away from their home, we get a sense that the clouds have moved in and we are not able to see the mountain so clearly. Yet even when the clouds cover the mountain the prophet asserts that God is there.

- When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
- When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.
- When you walk through the fire you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

² Sahw, p. 51.

How can the prophet assert this? Because God is there even we cannot see him, even in the dark days of disappointment, doubt, and discouragement. The Lord calls for faith on the part of his children. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” (Isaiah 43)

Knowing that there will be days when the clouds cover the mountain, when our view of God is hampered and our enthusiasm is dampened, let us take full advantage of that great and glorious day when Jesus rose from the waters of the baptism, when the heavens were opened, when God Almighty poured out his words of affirmation on Jesus, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

There was plenty to cloud our view of God that day. Chapter three in Luke gives a forecast of the weather that was daunting and dour. The people of God were under the rule of Caesar, the emperor of Rome. Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene. All of these rulers and their oppressive decrees cast a pall over the people of God who were waiting for God to break through the clouds and drive out the enemies and shine forth in all of his glory and might. Even though Luke three tells of the ministry of John the Baptist and the crowds that flocked to him to be baptized there is the ominous note that John’s bold words would get him in trouble. He would be arrested by Herod the tetrarch. He would be imprisoned. Those familiar with the story know those clouds did not bode well for John the Baptist, who was ultimately beheaded. So yes, we need God to break through the clouds and tear open the heavens and speak a word of blessing on Jesus. “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

I came across a statement by Raymond Brown about what is happening in Luke 3, when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River. Brown lists the various rulers, beginning with Tiberius Caesar and on through Pilate and Herod. He acknowledges that they were clearly in control of the situation at that point. But Brown makes an assertion that turns the powerful rulers on their heads. Because of the voice of God that speaks from the heavens, “Luke and his audience know that the ripples sent

forth by the immersion of Jesus in the Jordan will eventually begin to change the course of the Tiber.”³ What a wonderful phrase. The Tiber is one of the largest rivers in Italy and the city of Rome stands on the eastern banks of the Tiber. Caesar, you can call yourself Lord...you can send out a decree that everyone should go to their own house to be registered for a census...you can even empower your designated rulers to crucify those who stand in opposition to you. But a ripple has gone forth from the Jordan River in the faraway land of the Middle East. Jesus has stepped into the water. And the fog and the clouds and the mist and the deceptions of life have lifted for a brief shining moment. God showed himself when the heavens opened, and God showed that this Jesus would be the Savior of the world. This Jesus would be Lord of heaven and earth. “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

That Jesus is the Son of God makes it amazing in its own right that Jesus himself would endure the fog of discouragement and disappointment, abandonment and betrayal. Even he who climbed the Mount of Transfiguration and stood side by side and then was raised above the great leaders of the past, Moses and Elijah, this Jesus would walk the lonesome valley. He would pray with anguished tears in the garden of Gethsemane. He would cry out from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” As heartbreaking as it is for us to anticipate this part of Jesus’ journey, isn’t it amazing in its own right that he walked through the fire and he walked through the floods. People of God, we will go through the floods. We will walk through the fire. The clouds will roll in and there will be days, weeks, months, seasons, and even years when we can’t see the mountain. Know that even though we can’t see the mountain it is there. Know that even when we can’t see or even feel the presence, the peace, and the power of God, our God is with us. The sky will turn dark when the Son of God hangs on the cross and dies. But daylight will come again when he rises on the third day from the dead. The voice of God will ring out once again, “He is not here. He has risen from the dead. He is alive.” And Jesus will stand with us and say those words that empower and give us strength and hope for the journey. “I am with you always, even to the end of the days.”

³ Raymond E. Brown, “The Birth of the Messiah”, 414.

It was of great interest to me when Luci Shaw, writing about Epiphany, used the image of the mountain that was often covered by clouds and obscured by mist. I anticipated her giving a moving testimony about how God parted the clouds and revealed the divine glory to her in a great and powerful way. After all, this is the season of Epiphany, when our hearts are stirred by stories of bright shining stars that guide wise men on their journey to Bethlehem, of the heavens opening as God speaks words of blessing on Jesus, sending those ripples that one day changed the course of the Tiber.

Instead Luci Shaw tells of losing her husband Harold. With his death she said she was covered in mist and unable to see the mountain of God's glory. She said others came forward with stories of epiphanies. Some had dreams and visions of her dead husband Harold. On All Saints' Day a friend saw Luci's dead husband Harold in the balcony of her church, "Beaming with joy and light." Another friend dreamed they were having dinner at Luci's house. After helping me in the kitchen the friend re-entered the dining room to see Harold sitting at the head of the table. "Luci thinks she's all alone," he told her, "but I'm watching, and I know everything she does." Others had these epiphanies, but not Luci Shaw. As she puts it, she wanted something herself, something direct to satisfy her. And at this point Luci Shaw writes a very helpful word for us, for all of us. "Both by nature and definition, epiphanies of the divine are rare. Exceptional."

It seems instead of a stunning epiphany or appearance by God, Luci Shaw was to find a reminder of God's presence in a small demonstration. See if you can relate to this small episode of grace in her life, this tiny, even teeny epiphany. One Tuesday Luci was headed to a prayer group she meets with on a weekly basis. She was carrying her journal with her as she picked up a young mother with her baby and stroller and gave her a ride to the prayer meeting. When Luci arrived at the prayer meeting she realized she did not have her journal. She panicked. She rushed back to the car, checked it, scoured the parking lot, looked under every loose stone, all of this in the pouring rain. No journal. Luci calls her journal an extension of herself and the journal was

lost. In a very real sense the loss of the journal was a loss of a piece of herself. Resigning herself to this loss, even realizing that as she had to give up her husband Harold she also had to give up her journal, that at some point we have to lose our whole selves to God, she returned to the prayer group, shaking as she sat down.

The host burst into the room beaming and said, “Karen Cooper just called to say she found your journal in a puddle in the middle of University Avenue. You can pick it up at her house this afternoon.” It had fallen off the top of the car when Luci was helping the mother of the young baby load up the stroller. “Later, when Karen, my student and friend, handed the soggy journal back to me, there was a tire print stripped across its familiar, ugly, orange front cover, its back cover was half ripped off, and the coiled binding of its spine of its spine was bent and flattened. But God had given it back to me.” Luci’s friend said to her, “Some people doubt the personal involvement of God in their lives. Why should I, who knew you so well, and knew where to call you, be the one to stop my car in the rain, to find out what it was that had caught my eye, lying in that puddle? Why did I stop at all? Traffic was heavy. There were scores of cars and bicycles and pedestrians travelling on that busy street. But I found the journal and saw your name written on the front”” Luci Shaw wrote that night, “Oh, I feel it so profoundly, pierced to the core with its reality. God does care for me. He has not abandoned me...He showed himself, beaming his light to my heart in a true epiphany.”⁴

Epiphanies are the exception, not the rule. By their very definition they are exceptions. That means we are probably going to spend many of our days in the mist and fog and not able to see the mountain of God, the full presence and power and glory of God. We might end up being thankful for some small epiphanies like soggy notebooks that have been run over in the rain, but in their own way they are a precious reminder that God does indeed care for us.

⁴ Luci Shaw, 54-56.

But on this day when such a wonderful epiphany like the baptism of Jesus stands before us as a shining example of God's revelation, it seems appropriate to state the obvious. If we are looking for epiphanies and revelation and a clear view of the mountain, let us never forget what this book is that we call the Bible. It is the word of God. It is the revelation of God. Wouldn't it be a shame if spent our days looking for signs of miracles and signals of God's grace and neglected to look right here? In these pages is the revelation of God's amazing grace, the story of God's love for this world, the story of God sending the Beloved Son not just to change the course of the Tiber, but to change our very lives. Here is the revelation of God's intent to transform our lives, to seek what is lost until it is found, to take what is broken and make it whole, to gather our sorrows and trade them for joy, to sweep away the mourning so that our feet are set free to dance, and to confront the death of this world head on, so that life can be lived in the richest and fullest way imaginable.

You see, it is the promise of the gospel that this man named Jesus Christ who was baptized in the Jordan is the Savior of the World. Because of him God sees each one of us in a completely new way. His righteousness becomes our righteousness. Read this story and you will discover that God, the Father in Heaven, is looking at you and saying precious and powerful words. Oh, people of God, let the clouds be dispelled. Let the fog and the mist be blown away. Let the heavens open. And hear the good news. The Father in Heaven is speaking to each one of us, and what he says will change your life forever. "You are my child whom I love. With you I am well pleased."