

January 2016

On Ornaments, Epiphanies & Congregations



In the Christian liturgical calendar, January 6th is Epiphany.

It is the day when the wise men appear in the Christmas birth narrative honoring the indwelling of the good news on earth, yet juxtaposed with the suffering that seems to be ever present in the world.

A traditional carol celebrates the span of time between Christmas and Epiphany - The Twelve Days of Christmas. **Epiphany can be understood in a couple of ways: one as a sudden realization - as in to have an epiphany, and the second is to experience something - as in the coming of god.**

In a 2008 article in Christianity Today, authors Edwin and Jennifer Woodruff Tait write, "*Epiphany sends us into the world to live out the Incarnation, to witness to the light of Christ in the darkness.*"



The point is that what we have come to understand about Christmas does not end on December 25th, but really has just begun. There is something in the days after Christmas Day that lead us to understand life in new ways - that provide opportunities for epiphanies to occur.

As I write this article, I am looking at my own Christmas tree, with lights twinkling and a myriad of ornaments nestled in nooks of the tree, dangling from tips of branches, multicolored, diverse, and yet coming together in a unique way. We are post Christmas Day ... so the presents are gone and the music is stilled. The creative chaos of wrapping, gift giving, gift receiving, meal preparation and consumption are quiet now.

I know for many ministers the Advent/Christmas season is one of their least favorite times of the year because of all the crazy busy activities for which they are responsible. It is not until after

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Christmas that they are able to slow down enough to actually experience Christmas.

I know that others have already taken down and put away their Christmas decorations, but mine are still up. In the past our tree has often stayed up long into January because I tend to be slow in dismantling it, or sometimes it was taken down quickly because the limbs are stiff and dried up, and there were more needles on the floor than on the tree. Because we succumbed to an artificial tree a few years ago, **I now have more choice in when I dismantle the tree with its ornaments.** So the tree remains in

its place, reminding me of the Christmas that has just passed as well as ones over the years. Without the demand of getting ready for Christmas, I can now sit and enjoy this for all it represents.

As my eyes wander over the tree, I pause and reflect on various ornaments.



The oldest one - nearly 50 years old - is a tiny half shell walnut with a small baby tucked in as though sleeping in her crib; a present from my oldest brother from when he was in the army and stationed in Germany.

Not too far away is the Batman, from Hallmark - suspended in space - a gift to my hero-loving

son from my in-laws nearly 20 years ago, one of a couple of dozen ornaments they gave to both my son and daughter over the years.



Barney the Dinosaur is one of those, whose purple presence eventually became embarrassing to hang up so stayed in the box for many years until maturity and time said it was okay to pull him out again.

Around the side of the tree are the delicate clay cutouts representing the Acoma pueblo in New Mexico where my husband and I visited this past summer.



Other trips across the years are spread across the tree as well - the gold islands of Hawaii, the maple leaf from a family reunion in New Hampshire, the porcelain commemorative from New York picturing a young man looking out expectantly over a ship's railing at the Statue of Liberty -

website, subscribe to her regular posts, or read any of her books. You will come away feeling refreshed and grounded! Here is a sample from Epiphany 2016.

For Those Who Have Far to Travel *A Blessing for Epiphany*

If you could see the journey whole, you might never undertake it, might never dare the first step that propels you from the place you have known toward the place you know not.

Call it one of the mercies of the road: that we see it only by stages as it opens before us, as it comes into our keeping, step by single step.

There is nothing for it but to go, and by our going take the vows the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to the next step; to rely on more than the map; to heed the signposts of intuition and dream;

who could have been my grandfather when he immigrated through Ellis Island a century ago, a wooden clapping lobster from a college trip to Boston, or the wooden pelican that we got in New Orleans thirty years ago when celebrating my father's 75th birthday.

There are gifts from friends and family who know of our interests and passions.

Baylor Bear logos in green and gold, hand crocheted angels, needlepoint and cross-stitched santa clauses, hand carved and painted cutouts of Texas, and a family favorite - a Star Trek shuttlecraft that plays a greeting from Spock saying "Shuttlecraft to Enterprise, Spock here. Happy holidays.

Live long and prosper."



There are hand painted ornaments from the time when my daughter and I would visit a paint-your-own pottery shop down the street from where we lived in Birmingham.



One of them carries the overlapping handprints of my son and daughter - which would be swallowed up by their current sized hands. We even have pictures of the children with Santa Claus as they grew up - some smiling, some crying, and some confused by the whole process.

Last year my daughter and I went to a glass-blowing event as a mother-daughter outing with friends, and the results hang on the tree as well with glass swirls and polka dots to remember our time together.

As I pause, I see dozens more ornaments with a myriad of stories and even more memories.

Now my epiphany comes. This tree is just like the many congregations with which I work, and the ones with whom you are involved. It is made up of individual, unique ornaments - people who have come together and are hanging out on the same tree. Each has its own history of how it came to be, and how it came to be gathered together here in the same place.

Some have been there for a long time, while others are more recent arrivals. Some remind us of our connections and deepen the relationships that exist. Some remind us of those who are no longer in

to follow the star that only you will recognize;

to keep an open eye for the wonders that attend the path; to press on beyond distractions, beyond fatigue, beyond what would tempt you from the way.

There are vows that only you will know: the secret promises for your particular path and the new ones you will need to make when the road is revealed by turns you could not have foreseen.

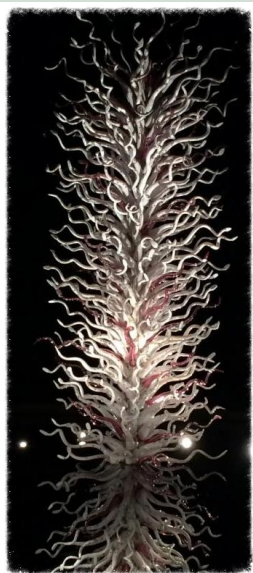
Keep them, break them, make them again; each promise becomes part of the path, each choice creates the road that will take you to the place where at last you will kneel

to offer the gift most needed- the gift that only you can give- before turning to go home by another way.

-Jan Richardson
from *Circle of Grace*

our midst, yet whose gifts and graces and love and generosity continue to live on. Some are fragile and need to be handled gently and with love, while others are tough and can withstand the jostling of the years and the curiosity of dogs and children. Some embarrass us and we want to hide them away at least for a time, while others are the favorites we look for year after year. **But all of them have a place on the tree - all of them have a place within the congregation, within the family.** Each fills a unique niche, space, or position. Each moves in a particular way in the world and sheds light into the darkness of our lives. The good news comes, god comes, epiphany comes.

In our world, 2015 has ended with a lot of suffering whether it is a culture negating that Black Lives Matter, or mass shootings, or thousands of refugees from violence seeking a new home, or the myriad of smaller more personal difficulties in our lives.



Yet as we begin a new year, as we come to the twelfth day of Christmas, as we open ourselves to the epiphanies of wisdom, insight, action and vision that are yet to come, may we be grateful for all the diversity that exists in our lives, for those who have come before and for those with whom we now share our lives.

I am grateful for the myriad of Christmas tree congregations, who create their own unique ministry that fit the needs and desires within their own communities, that live out the Incarnation, that shine a light in the darkness, and that celebrate the richness of stories in their midst. I am honored to know so many of you.

Blessings on the journey!

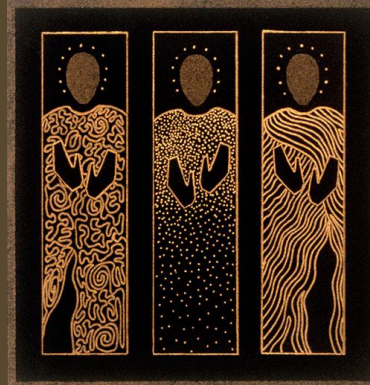
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