

Protagonist Corner

Epiphanal Thoughts

J. Stephen Rhodes

Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center, Berea, Kentucky

It is a bleak midwinter in eastern Kentucky and I have not been sleeping well—partly, I am sure, because of indigestion caused by overindulgence. (Lent will be a relief.) However, the more pertinent cause of my insomnia is that this is a season of discontent, at least for many of my friends, my family, and certainly for me.

A fellow minister complained to me two nights ago about how mean-spirited parishioners were being, and at work we have dragged ourselves in, sometimes puffy-eyed, to contend with our various challenges while fighting colds, the odds, or each other. Epiphany, with its theme of light, seems a pale reflection of the preceding season, especially since we have now entered the “gray days” where the seemingly perpetual cloud cover makes me think we live on the planet Venus. Truly, we are living between the times—between fall and spring, and Advent and Lent.

Living between the times means living with tension and incompleteness. It means recognizing that Christ, the light, has come, but has not come again. Thus, though light shines, much darkness “comprehends it not,” both in me and in the lives of my friends and family—not to mention the world at large. A certain peacefulness can come with this realization.

As I have suggested, this has not been an easy Epiphany. One of my closest coworkers and I recently tangled about how best to envision our organization’s future. A few mornings ago we hammered away at each other’s organizational philosophies while defending our own, much like the Monitor and the Merrimac.

During it all, I am happy to say, we managed to avoid hurtfulness—mostly—and in the end we made up rather well.

The night of this discussion, however, ended up being a long, dark night of soul for me. I woke up at 4:00 A.M. with my mental wheels spinning, “Should I go into the office today and reverse my position? Did I overplay my hand?” Etc.

No matter how hard I tried to sleep, using a variety of methods, I finally realized that this fitfulness *might* be like God calling Samuel’s name in the night. A wise friend once encouraged me not to fight late-night stirrings because the subconscious may well have some important messages in store. So I got up, determined that I would at least read something useful, as it turned out, a book about the life and thought of Simone Weil, the wonderfully perplexing French author.

In the chapter I was reading, Weil contends that the way we come to know what is real is through *work*. Knowledge comes when we grapple with the tension that exists between self and world. One cannot know what is real simply by observing or deducing. Knowledge is labor and for her literally involved sweating at the side of factory workers and common laborers.

As I worked my way through the preceding day’s debate and reflected on my own patterns of behavior, it became clear to me that reversing my position in the debate would be unwise. My viewpoint, though flawed, is essential to counterbalance that of my colleague. The two positions need each other, much as organizations need both

fiscal liberals and fiscal conservatives to thrive. Moreover, I know myself well enough to know that after I take a stand at odds with another person, I get cold feet. I become very uncomfortable living the tension that life necessarily entails.

At some point in these mental circumambulations, I found myself remarkably at peace. Somehow, lifting up the tension between my colleague and me made this possible, as did getting up in the middle of the night and reading Weil. It became clear to me that, like a dancer or boxer, I need to find balance in unbalanced situations — to make peace with unpeaceful tensions. I believe my insight was a gift of grace, but one won with great effort.

Here, paradoxes abound. Peace came upon me like a gift, but I had to struggle to find it. One can be at rest while in motion; balanced while off balance. Self-knowledge comes in the encounter with the other.

My own belief is that this was a divine moment in my life, an epiphany. I think my revelation helped me better understand who God is, not only as one who stands with *us* in tension, but who *exists* in tension - an “Other” who lives, and thrives, in tension with us. I remember once writing in a graduate school paper that while we humans live in tension, thankfully, God does not. Fortunately my professor, Jürgen Moltmann, asked, “Why not?” After my long night, I echo his sentiment.

The wonder of this season of Epiphany for me is that God lives with us in tension and discontent. Light shines between the times. One day we will not see through a glass darkly, but for the moment, seeing this sweaty little is enough.