



Epiphany of Christ, Year A

You Have Choices

The Bible passages for Epiphany present us with all kinds of choices. Will we shine and arise above ancient oppressive views? What paths will we choose on behalf of God's global and justice-loving realm?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Today's texts remind me of my work with those outside the church who are aware of God's hope for liberating oppressed communities. They surprise us when they lead us to advocate for justice within society, but also within the church." Randall C. Bailey



"The Wise Ones chose a path home that saved the special child. What would it look like if they chose a path that saved all God's children?" Angela Bauer-Levesque



"We can acknowledge and employ the power we have to make life changing choices." Mary Foulke

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

“Light” is the topic of the season following Epiphany, a season which is extremely short this year. So let us pay special attention to these images of light and darkness, a couple of weeks after the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere.

The prophet announcing the arrival of light in Isaiah 60:1-3 speaks to an audience in the ancient city, Yehud, following the exile of God’s people, Judah. The people speak about their time in captivity in Babylon as a time absent of light. In this passage, the light points to a new day. It shines on people gathering from all corners of the earth and coming together as a community, a family. Such a vision is particularly good news today for many LGBT people who experience exile and estrangement from families, church or society.

Rather than remaining far from the home they love, they have chosen to return home to their mother Jerusalem. Sons return from far away and daughters are carried by nursing women. Yes, they return to be nurtured and nursed at Jerusalem’s consoling breast (Isaiah. 66:11). Here is tenderness with sensual connotations.



Where in the world is light and hope growing dim during this Epiphany season? Where do you pray for God to shine?

Today, the pairing of light and dark imagery must be critically examined. Light and dark has often been linked with the dualism of good and evil. In addition, darkness has been equated with dark-skinned people and used, in our racialized society, to reinforce racism in many forms. The linkage of darkness, with its connotation of evil, and dark-skinned people must be exposed and condemned.

LGBT people of all colors know what it feels like to be on the underside of socially-accepted dualisms and to be labeled as “other” or “evil.” We wonder: What difference would it make if we heard God’s call to “arise” as a call to move beyond such damaging dualisms and to become a beacon of light for the entire community? Indeed, this would be a wonderful and different kind epiphany!



When have you heard or seen the image of darkness used to convey evil? What do you see as potential problems with such imagery today?

The 60th chapter of Isaiah is included among the lectionary readings because verse 6 mentions frankincense – supporting the assigned gospel reading, Matthew 2:11, about the Magi. Yet, the Isaiah passage was directed largely to the upper classes, since it was mostly their relatives who were taken off to Babylon. Isaiah’s reference to frankincense aligns more with wealth than with

Mary, Joseph, and the child Jesus – those of marginal economic means.

Psalm 72 invokes images of the royal court with its ruler and empire. Depending on how one dates the psalm, whether in 8th century Israel or Judah, or during Second Temple times, the specifics of imperial power and oppression shift. Regardless of the dating, the historic exploitation of the majority of the people stays the same. In this psalm the particular ruler is praised for acting justly and defending the poor and outcast. This brings to mind that institutions and states that deserve praise as well for protecting LGBT people from oppression and violence through their laws.



Where outside the church or other faith communities do you see God's liberating work? What might these efforts teach the church?

Ephesians 3:1-12 speaks of the mystery of Christ and offers both liberating images and potentially oppressing ones. Invitations to become members of a body (Ephesians 3:6) can be liberating, as long as all the members have equal standing. LGBT and other marginalized people know the injustice all too well, however, when one is assigned second-class status within a body – whether that body is the church or society. Rather than this second-class status, the promise here is of boundless riches that affirm diversity and celebrates difference. This passage also makes use of a language of slavery, people are asked to make themselves slaves of Christ (Ephesians 3:7). Today we are wise to use such language cautiously or not at all – for the legacy of slavery still rears its ugly head.

All these passages about rulers – those both exploitative and justice making – and poor people – caught in a world that slavery built – frame the gospel story of the coming of the Wise Ones.

The Epiphany gospel, **Matthew 2:1-12**, is a story of choices. It is the story of the choice of privileged people (represented in Herod) deciding between responding to God or attempting to contain, kill or prevent God from acting. Further, even before the Magi find Jesus, Herod is frightened that they might like the child – typical of those partaking in power who try to make sure other privileged people do not take an oppressed person seriously. Magi, on the other hand, represent those outside the covenant community (church) who are more attuned with what God is doing than those within the faith community.



What are the choices you can make or actions you might take to stop the Herod's of our day?

The end story of the gospel when the Magi return by a different road represents a choice as well – when the privileged allies (in our world LGBT allies and supporters) chose another path than one of supporting continuing violence to the oppressed. That is good news for those on the underside and in the margins.

Jesus as presented in this gospel story, however, is lifted up as an alternative kind of ruler to that

of Herod. Jesus is legitimized from above, by a royal Christology. He is presented as the king who brings justice and will challenge the Romans to liberate his people, “a ruler who is to shepherd my people” (Matthew 2:6). Yet, is Jesus’ liberating role diminished by the trappings of royal gifts of the Magi from the east? Gifts of privilege are presented and Jesus is saved while other children are left to Herod’s killing.

This resonates with the dynamics of some members of the LGBT communities making it at the expense of all the others who are abandoned and ostracized by society. These are members of our community judged not white enough, muscular enough, acceptable enough to be in a relationship. Similarly, those of the underclass often feel they can only be validated by those of the upper classes and settle for gifts from them instead of seeking alliances. All of us have choices to make; even when we feel disempowered in one arena we have power in another.



As you pray, what are the choices you and your community are facing that come to mind? In what ways might the discussion of these Epiphany readings shape your response to the choices?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



O God of justice, you sent your Christ
to establish your realm of freedom and peace on earth as in heaven.
Prosper every effort to challenge arrogance,
prejudice and fear, and
to thwart all forms of discrimination,
degradation and oppression.
Through the one who died at the oppressor's hands, Jesus Christ,
our redeemer, who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

*Adapted from Dennis Michno, A Priests Handbook, 3rd Edition
(Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1998) 259.*

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1st Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of Jesus, Year A

Called In or Out?

What does it mean to be chosen by God? What does it mean to be loved by God?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“Walking hand in hand with God – portrayed as a strong woman – is a metaphor that gives me courage and hope.” Angela Bauer-Levesque



“God's love and pleasure in our being is a call to justice for all.” Mary Foulke



“God is reaching out to communities that are marginalized, such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, to bring forth justice. What God does for us, God does through us. For God’s justice to be done, we must consent to being God’s justice workers.” Robert Griffin

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Through the ages scholars have surmised the identity of the servant in **Isaiah 42:1-9**. Two interpretations have emerged; one identifies the servant with a heroic individual, and the other with the collective Israel. Contemporary readers, inclined toward the latter interpretation, might substitute the collective Israel with the LGBT communities of our respective contexts. We might ask then with Israel, how do we understand ourselves as chosen by God, as delight to God's being (the Hebrew *nephesh* has a more wholistic meaning than the translation "soul" suggests) and endowed with God's spirit (Isaiah 42: 1)?

There is much joy in this passage, joy found in struggle. A female-identified God takes a female "you" by the hand (verse 6). Gender boundaries have become fluid. The goal of the struggle, namely to "establish justice on the earth" is all that counts — justice for all everywhere (verse 4). Such a universal promise offers hope, even though some might find God's impartiality (see also **Acts 10:34**) hard to bear because it means that God is impartial to LGBT people as well. There clearly remains a tension between God's universal promise and God's choosing a particular people.

Chosenness has long been understood as entitlement that has resulted in violence and terror for many. What would it mean if we instead understood chosenness as belovedness? Such theology offers rich possibilities as it takes the emphasis away from the supposed qualities of those who are loved and emphasizes instead the gracious gift of love itself. Still the idea of chosenness raises serious questions as to who is left out of choice and left out of love. The Isaiah passage adds an important criterion: the bringing of justice – leading us to claim that if we love, we make justice. Feeling loved leads to more self-esteem and consequently a better ability to act justly and to extend love beyond the confines of a chosen few.



What does baptism mean to you? In what ways might it connect you with others or separate you from others?

Among the current lectionary passages, **Matthew 3:13-17** offers the connecting thread. Baptism is introduced as the equalizer. Within a Christian context this ritual functions to initiate and promote bonding.

On the other hand in interfaith and inter-religious contexts, baptism is sometimes seen as placing barriers on who can belong. **Psalms 29** was chosen in the lectionary for how it links with the baptism of Jesus. In the passage, as with Matthew's account, "the voice of God is over the waters" (verse 3). Yet the psalm's powerful words over the

waters do not call out one individual as blessed, but rather demonstrates God's power, majesty, and blessing over all creation. What is God intending in all this water work? What does baptism, a rite that marks inclusion into and exclusion out of a community of chosenness, imply about those who do not enter its water? How do we express openness to other faiths? What rituals might affirm God's working outside of the community of the baptized?

The gifts of the spirit of God and divine love are the ritual outcomes of Jesus' baptism. As a result we too become agents of God's spirit, mercy and justice in the world – part of the baptismal covenant we often don't remember. What difference does our lives of faith look like when we truly live our baptismal covenants?

As baptized LGBT people of faith, we are called not to shrink from our baptismal covenant. Even though there are those who attempt to push us outside the community, we are the community of the baptized, we are beloved. Our baptisms call us to work for opening up the blessings of baptism for all within Christ's body. Such blessings, it seems, include marriage and ordination for LGBT people who are called to, but denied these rites. At the same time, we are called to look beyond our own chosen community to live in love and justice with God's children of *all* religions and faiths.



If you are not baptized, what about this conversation encourages you to seek baptism or to turn away from it? What difference might baptism make in how you see others or act in the world?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



O Brother Jesus, who in your baptism
left us a sign of your love and acceptance.
Grant we beseech you, so to honor your calling,
that we may ever perceive our own preciousness in your eyes
and be moved to share the pain of those on the margins,
that we may in all of life promote
the dignity and freedom of every human being.
In your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

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2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

True Identity

What does it mean to be chosen by God? What does it mean to be loved by God?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“The authenticity of John the Baptist calls us to join him – to lead and to follow.”
Mary Foulke



“Even when stuck in the mud of despair and waiting for justice to be established, we can still have a song of hope in our hearts and in our mouths. In the difficult moment, there are still gifts to embrace and celebrate. Our gratitude will steady our steps and fill us with a new song.” Robert Griffin



“What keeps me from acting and hearing myself addressed in Jesus’ question, ‘what are you looking for?’” Angela Bauer-Levesque

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Strength and staying hidden from the enemy are images evoked from **Isaiah 49:1-7**. The servant, the nation Israel, confesses identity as born and called by God, endowed with gifts (hidden by God for protection, verse 2), and then sent to show strength and enlightenment to others. Images of birth and body connect with sword and arrow. Restoration is the underlying theme, restoration of those who have been despised. **Psalms 40:1-11** evokes further images of restoration and protection, proclaiming trust in God as the one whose love and covenant loyalty keep the psalmist safe.



Can war bring peace? Can destruction build up?
Can violence heal? Why do you answer these
questions as you do? What do our prayers,
experience or reason teach about these questions?

In **1 Corinthians 1:1-9**, the apostle Paul greets the church at Corinth, describes the congregation as faithful, and then admonishes them to be blameless. Paul's admonition continues through the reading for today – accusing members of the Corinthian church of all kinds of misdeeds. Further, Paul's demand for blamelessness continues to function as a concept of control from above. Those in power determine what is acceptable, while everyone else competes with each other for good standing.

What connects Paul's letter with the other readings for the day is the language of strength through God's blessing, here expressed "you are not lacking in any spiritual gifts" (verse 7). Congregations of all stripes may want to probe this line further and celebrate the plethora of gifts among them.

The gospel passage this week shifts from Matthew to John. **John 1:29-42** presents conversations of John the Baptizer with Jesus right after his baptism – also between Jesus and Andrew and Simon.

In light of the preceding texts promising strength and restoration, the call here is for name change — new identities, or new understandings of one's present identity. See verse 43: "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). Name change connects to an invitation to "come and see" (verse 39) and eventually an invitation to leadership. The calling is to claim one's identity to its fullest, and to use it to follow Jesus (verse 43), to do God's work, even if we do not feel particularly prepared or comfortable.



What or who has most contributed to shaping who you are and in shaping your community of faith? What ways does following Jesus shape your identity or your congregations? How do you live out your identity in the world?

The dynamics resonate deeply with societal dynamics for many LGBT people, called to come out, be out, use the gift of one's identity to act faithfully, even if it is neither safe nor comfortable but does need to get done.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



God of Many Names,
help us to honor and claim our identity in you.
You above all others know us best.
Help us to be our true selves,
embodying you as we are without guilt, shame or blame.
Our actions and works call us to places where we wonder, where is
God?
Allow us the time to stop and
know that you are as near to us as our next breath.
Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

3rd Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

Met in Darkness, Seen in Light

We continue this week drawn into Epiphany's troubling imagery of light and darkness. What does God reveal?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"I believe that we are part of a beautiful tapestry. And the wonderful thing about a tapestry is that it can be larger and include more threads and more colors. Our job is to weave a global tapestry that leaves no one out!" Robert Griffin



"I wonder what it takes for more people to feel comfortable agreeing to disagree."
Angela Bauer-Levesque



"I am consistently surprised by the strength and depth that difference provides for community." Mary Foulke

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Isaiah 9:1-4 returns to the Epiphany imagery of light and darkness, promising victory of one over the other. (See also our conversation for Epiphany, Year A, January 6, 2008). Equating darkness with oppression in Babylon, the prophet promises light and liberation. Victory is celebrated; and the spoils of war are triumphantly divided. While human emotions of revenge are understandable, preaching reversed oppression is highly problematic. How can we listen in new ways to these texts that are bound by such dualisms between light and dark, victory and desolation of the enemies? Can we imagine liberation without turning around to oppress the oppressors?

The verses following the lectionary passage allow for some options, calling people to justice and righteousness (*mishpat* and *sedāqa* in verse 7) – that holistic understanding of acting for the wellbeing of all so precious in covenant language.

Psalms 27:1, 4-9 furthers the imagery of light – praising God who is “my light” (verse 1). Once again, light links with God’s redemption that is sufficient for all human needs.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 continues last week’s letter from Paul to the church at Corinth – calling for agreement among the members of the congregation. It was understandable during Roman rule that congregation were not to draw the attention of the authorities upon themselves by public quarrels. Yet the call for sameness and total agreement as a strategy in human communities is problematic. Healthy groups of people may agree to disagree, and to embrace and celebrate their differences, rather than coerce each other into assimilation. This dynamic is especially important in the building and maintaining of LGBT communities where many of us carry traumatic wounds of being excluded because of difference.



How evident is diversity and difference in your community or church? Who is invited? Where does your church or community seem to draw boundaries?

Matthew 4:12-23 returns to the narrative in Matthew where we learn about how dangerous it is for the Jews who are proclaiming change. John the Baptizer has been killed for his activities,

and Jesus is afraid enough to relocate to Capernaum. The writer of Matthew recites ancient Scripture from the prophet Isaiah – again drawing upon the dualistic language of light and darkness – to explain what is going on (verses 14-16).

Roman persecution recalls the past persecution and resistance of God’s exiled people in Babylonia. Now, Jesus publicly gathers followers to preach an end to the current empire. He knows what is at stake, and he moves forward without being overly cautious. He calls for a turn-around, repentance. What will it take for us to drop what we are doing and follow on this path.



What do you think about the word “repentance”?
What might be results of radical turn-arounds in your life, your church, and the public-political arena?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Holy God,
We meet you in the darkness,
we see you in the light.
Shine upon us.
Turn us around from
selfish interest and privilege.
Forgive us and give us courage
to shine with your compassion, justice, and peace.
Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

Last Sunday after Epiphany/ Transfiguration, Year A

Encounter on the Mountain

Today's readings depict magnificent encounters with God. What happens? Who is invited to the mountaintop? What difference does the company make in the encounter?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 24:12-18; Psalms 2 and 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“While these passages parallel Moses and Jesus, they get stuck on the law giver and not the liberator. Can we resist and transfigure these notions?” Randall C. Bailey



“I find the passionate encounters in the clouds equally intriguing and scary.” Angela Bauer-Levesque



“Mystery is not a club for the initiated but a challenge to those who think they know everything, know God.” Mary Foulke

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In today's mountain stories, we explore the encounters of well-known men between each other and God in search of a revelation. The men are Moses and Joshua in Exodus 24, and Jesus, Peter, James and John in Matthew 17. The stories are connected by the appearance of Moses and Elijah in the passage from Matthew.

In **Exodus 24:12-18**, the story at Mount Sinai, Moses and Joshua find themselves in a cloud for six days before Moses is called by an unidentified male voice (verse 14), assumed to belong to God. The mountain is covered by a cloud or divine heaviness (the basic meaning of the Hebrew word *kabod*, which the New Revised Version of the Bible translates as “glory”). From afar, we are told the encounter appeared as a consuming fire — a fiery passionate engagement on the mountain top. We are not told what happens hidden in the cloud, leading us to ask: what is the nature of this human-divine, all-male, encounter? Many images of divine ecstatic reverence come to mind including the Genesis story of Jacob wrestling/rolling around on the ground with God as a man by the river Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-32).

When exploring the Exodus story, we also ask: where are the women and children? Perhaps we can assume they are parked with the elders at the bottom of the mountain. The story does not reveal its ending. Rather, the lectionary passage ends with a second version of the story, leaving Moses by himself with God on the mountain (verse 18). If we rely solely on the lectionary reading, we are left not knowing whether or not Moses receives the tablets, only of his passionate encounter with God on the mountain.



What questions do you have about the encounter on the mountain and in the clouds? What do you imagine happened and what do you make of its significance?

Psalm 2 about the nations in an uproar appears to link with the Transfiguration story. There is a voice from heaven (verse 4) and a holy hill (verse 6). However this psalm has less mystery and more mess. The anonymous king is asked to bring order to it all. On the other hand, the retelling of the Transfiguration in **2 Peter 1:16-21** lacks any sense of mystery – there is no cloud at all.

The writer wants to be succinct and simply summarizes. Yet much of the significance of the cloud imagery in the earlier Exodus account derives from the obscurity of God in action. This encounter with God in the cloud is the mystery and it invites the reader to imagine all possibilities. Those of us who work on LGBT (or any other issues of justice) cannot expect to simply explain and convince others of our commitments. Rather we need to invite them into the cloud — invite them to experience transformation – no matter how scary.

In **Matthew 17:1-9**, the circle of witnesses gets smaller and is limited to Peter, James and John seeing Jesus with a glowing face and dazzling clothes. Jesus then encounters Moses and Elijah, and is instructed by these ancestors (verse 3). Contemporary readers and preachers uncomfortable with this intense all male rendezvous may want to imagine women in the encounter – Deborah and Esther and perhaps even Miriam (though she might have been scared that she would be cursed again turning white as snow. See Numbers 12:10).

A divine manifestation or theophanic vision follows: God announces from the cloud that Jesus is the Beloved (verse 5). The awe of the moment strikes fear into the three male disciples who find themselves on the ground. The need for widening the circles becomes clear. Yet, the narrator doesn't help, but remains uninterested in the relationships between Peter and Jesus. So how do we transfigure the transfiguration so that we become more inclusive in those who are invited to "summit"?

We favor a more inclusive encounter on the mountain. We resist limiting the numbers of people and instead call for broadening the numbers of those included. We hold these same commitments in encountering the public and political arena today. When it comes to our laws, we have to fight for legislation that is inclusive, especially as they impact the lives of LGBT people and oppressed people. There needs to be coalition building, and although today's Bible readings do not help us to see the imperative to do so. A point of entry, however, can be the need to make the circles bigger and to stop looking at mountains. As beautiful and dazzling as the view from the mountain top is, it skews our vision away from the collective encounter of God.



What do you find compelling and troubling about the story of the Transfiguration? What do you find compelling and troubling about the *Out In Scripture* conversation about the story? What might God be saying to you and your community through your own reflections?

The Holy Spirit reference in **2 Peter 1:21** may come in handy for at least it reminds us that the Spirit speaks through men *and* women. (We will need to be cautious, however, and not push the privileging of eye witnesses.) Through, with and beyond these lectionary passages, transformation takes commitment to change on local and global scales.

With all these texts suggesting only men make it to the mountain top and hear God, how do we broaden our vision of a community transformed? Will our Transfiguration stories include diverse

genders, classes, races, sexualities and abilities? How do we experience God differently in the exclusive vision and in a transformed inclusive vision?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Most glorious and inclusive God,
Help us to see your transfiguring powers
when we encounter you in inclusive communities.
Help us to feel your transfiguring powers
as you call our ancestors to attest to your hopes for us and our
communities.
Help us to experience your transfiguring powers
as we encounter Jesus resisting oppressive powers in his day and
ours.
Help us to encounter you transfigured before us
as we join you in bold ministries of inclusion, intimacy, and justice.
Transfigure our world.
Amen.

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