

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, January 9, 2022
Three Kings Day / First Sunday after Epiphany / The Baptism of Jesus

“Grace Appeared and Grace Emerging”

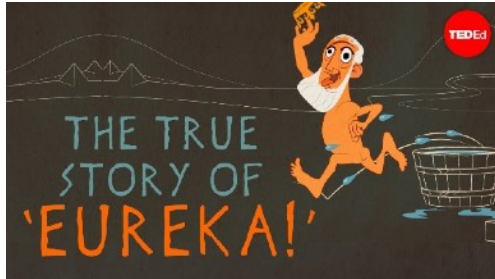
First of three sermons in a series on Epiphany entitled “Faith’s *Eureka!*”

Christian Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22



Did you ever find something and exclaim, “*Eureka!*”. If you did, you can claim to know some Greek. *Eureka* is a word from ancient Greece that means “I

have found it!” Specifically, it is the first person singular perfect indicative active of the verb ‘I find’.¹



The exclamation is attributed to Archimedes who when in the bath discovered a mathematical principle attributed to volume and was so excited he jumped-out, forgot to dress, and ran nude down the street shouting ‘Eureka’!

In order to ‘find’ something material, one needs to be able to ‘see’ something physical. When it comes to faith, we are speaking about something spiritual. So, to ‘find’ something spiritually we need to ‘understand’ something, and we need to ‘perceive’ it. And truth be told, some people just do not see spiritual truths. And often no matter how many times we explain it, they still do not perceive it.

The apostle Paul wrote, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). So, many people do not see that which people with faith see. I am reading a book now about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous Lutheran minister executed by the Nazis. Bonhoeffer perceived the

¹ “Eureka”, Wikipedia, found at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eureka_\(word\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eureka_(word)), accessed January 8, 2021.

profound evil of the egomaniacal Hitler far sooner than most of his allies, sooner than most of even his closest associates in the Confessing Church. He “knew that one could see some things only with the eyes of faith, but they were no less real and true than the things one saw with one’s physical eyes. But the eyes of faith have a moral component”.²



In contemporary times, Bonhoeffer’s theology is expressed by the exasperation “I don’t know how to explain to you that you should care about other people” (*misattributed* to Dr. Anthony Fauci).³

Numerous times, Jesus frustratingly commented that often some could not see and some could not hear no matter how clear he was.

² Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 278.

³ Kayla Chadwick, “I Don’t Know How to Explain to You That You Should Care about Others,” *Huffington Post*, June 26, 2017. Found at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/i-dont-know-how-to-explain-to-you-that-you-should_b_59519811e4b0f078efd98440, accessed January 9, 2022.

Matthew 13:16-18

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. 17 For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them, and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them. 18 Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower.



Jesus said many variations of what we read in Matthew: “But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which you see, and have not seen them, and to hear those things which you hear, and have not heard them” (Matthew 13:16-18). On many other occasions, after arguing or telling a parable Jesus would drop the mic by saying ‘And those who have eyes see and those who don’t can’t’.

During the next three weeks, we will celebrate the season of Epiphany and pray for faith and thus the ability to see spiritual truths that others do not. For most of my life, I have wondered how do people acquire faith? Our tradition asserts that it is God who gives us faith. While I think that is in large part true, I believe we also have a role to play in having faith.

Scott's Theory on What Is Needed to Have Faith

One, desire. If you don't desire it – you can forget it.

Two, time and context conducive to receive it.

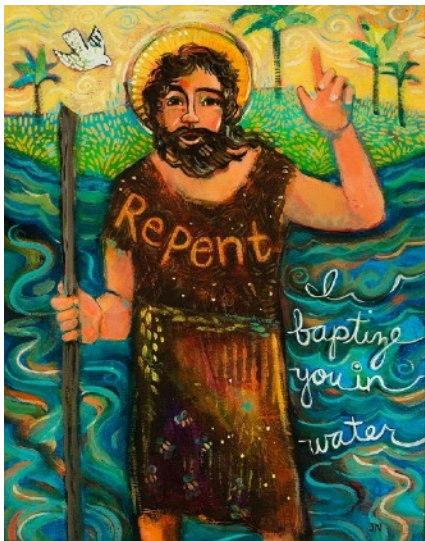
Three, to empty oneself of oneself in order to have a capacity to absorb it.

I believe that we must, one, desire faith. Two, I believe, two, that we must create the time and the context conducive to receive faith. And last but not least, we must empty ourselves of ourselves enough to create the capacity to absorb that faith. Truth be told, I have a desire. But, that's about it. My mind and life are so rushed that, I admit, I do not take near enough time nor am I enough in a setting conducive to receive faith. And, I am too absorbed with myself to be where I want to be. If you are with me, let us move forward together. If you are ahead me, I ask you to help me.



In the first scripture reading this morning we hear of the Three Wise Men who though they were not Jews, they were Gentiles, they nonetheless had faith. First, they had the *desire* to find. Hence, their journey. Second, they followed a star that led them to a place whereby they could *worship*. And finally, they acted *selflessly* by offering gifts for the Christ child. I prefer an alternative version of the

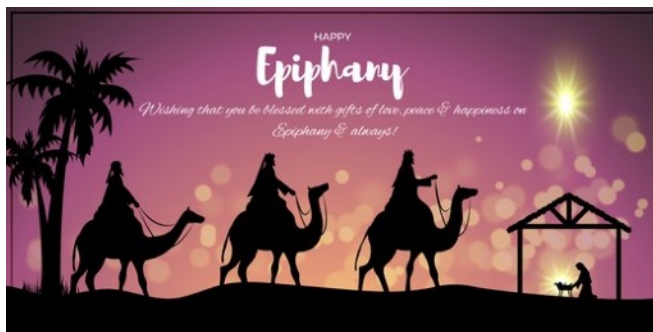
same story whereby 'The Three Wiser Women' brought baby wipes, a bottle of red wine, and a delightful macaroni and cheese casserole – all of which were infinitely more useful than gold, frankincense, and myrrh! Matthew contrasts The Three Wise Men who should not have had eyes to see or ears to hear with Herod, who as the king of the Jews should have had eyes to see and ears to hear - yet apparently did not. The Wise Men were receptive to an epiphany, a divine manifestation in the form of Jesus. Grace Appeared, and they, if they were to speak Greek, would have exclaimed, 'Eureka - "We found it!"'



Our second scripture reading recounting Jesus' baptism moves the story from 'Grace Appeared' to 'Grace Emerging' as the Godhead through the Holy Spirit announced Jesus' divine favor and authority. John the Baptist spoke openly of those who hear and see and those who do not. As with Mary's Magnificat, the message holds both promise and doom. John's message held promise for those

who hear and see – that is the ‘gathering the wheat into the barn’ bit. And it held dread and doom for those who do not see and hear – that is the ‘burn-up the chaff’ bit (Matthew 3:17). John the Baptist preached the Good News, but it was only ‘good’ to the repentant, those who humbled themselves in faith.

Those who came to John the Baptist, as well as John himself, were searching. They *desired* to see and hear the Messiah. They worshipped in the River Jordan, immersing themselves in ritual amidst Creation using water as the symbol of spiritual cleansing. And finally, through the rite of repentance and baptism they emptied themselves of themselves, shed their sins, and received grace, which is ‘underserved forgiveness’.



Friends, as we begin the New Year and celebrate the season of Epiphany, may we encounter our own *Eureka* moments when we find them. May we find grace through faith. Grace **appeared** in a babe and grace was **encountered** in the rabbi Jesus. Let us focus throughout this year on, one, *desiring* to follow Christ’s way. Two, let us make intentional *time and space* to worship, meditate, pray, and

fellowship with likeminded souls. And third and finally, let us *empty ourselves of ourselves* by supporting others through the beautiful ministries of this church: Brattleboro Centre of Children, Loaves & Fishes, hosting the Afghan Arrivals, and *Luz del Mundo*.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"