



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Making Epiphany a Habit

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

January 6, 2013

Today's gospel reading is one of my favorites in Jesus' story. First of all, these men from far away are not kings or merely wise men; they were magi, learned, and respected priests, most likely, from Persia. They observed the dance of the stars and interpreted the meaning of what they saw. What is unusual is that their response to what they saw was a journey that took them to a new experience of God. They didn't go just to satisfy their curiosity or to assure themselves that they had correctly interpreted the stars; they went and encountered the divine in such a surprising way that they worshipped. These priests from another religion were confronted with something beyond their normal routine and they responded uncharacteristically. There are all kinds of theological points to be made there but today I'm more interested in what happens at the end of the story. In a dream, they were warned not to return to Herod and apparently thought it better to do something different. So, they went home by another way. I like that way of describing what they did much more than what we heard today - "they left for their own country by another road." We are robbed of the wondering which is present in "they went home by another way."

Let's take the sentence apart. First of all, to go home is not just to return to the place that you reside. It is to go back to your source, to your center, to the heart of all that is. Home is the place that formed us. In this case, I hear it as the original home, the place of creating, I hear God. They returned to God in a new way, by doing something new. That is precisely what an Epiphany does to you. It makes you see and do new things.

We talk about Christians as Easter people. Well, what does it look like if we try being Epiphany people for 2013? This would mean that we expect and do new things or do old things in a new way. How might the experience of meeting God in the Christ child, in the experience of worship, in the fellowship and work of this faith community cause you to have an aha! moment and send you out in another way in search of more.

It could be very exciting. What might get in our way? Well, we are creatures of habit and doing something new requires new habits or changing old ones. And as luck would have it, there's a terrific book all about that. It's called *The Power of Habit* by award winning *New York Times* investigative reporter Charles Duhigg. It is a fascinating and easy read about some cutting edge science told through compelling stories. Habits are good things, they help us function efficiently. Take driving a car. It becomes so routine that you don't have to think through how far to turn the wheel or brake as you come up to a stop sign, it's a habit. Brushing your teeth is a habit; so is snacking while you watch the game. There are habits we want to keep and many we want to change. Understanding how habits work can prove most valuable.

Habits are all about cues and rewards joined by a routine. The trick is to first understand just what the rewards are in our habits. Americans didn't brush their teeth until Pepsodent came along and gave the reward of a tingly clean feeling mouth. No other tooth paste or powder had ever had that. Pepsodent made a game changing habit producer because it gave people reward that they didn't even know that they wanted. We don't even think about it now because brushing one's teeth is a national habit so much so that we don't even think in terms of reward. One man's afternoon cookie habit took a while to decipher. As it turned out the reward wasn't the sweet chewy goodness but the socializing break that going to the cafeteria gave him. Addictions are habits on steroids – the reward is the buzz or thrill and the numbing of pain, shame and insecurity. The rewards from good habits are varied; feeling healthy and good, the endorphin rush from exercise, a feeling of accomplishment for a job completed and well done; a sense of connection that you get from helping someone. It's a long list and sometimes not as obvious as you might think.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org



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Understanding the cues that engage habits is critical, especially if you want to change a one. A cue can be a time of day; it's morning, I drink coffee which is its own reward. It can be leaving the house for work and following the habitual route that become so routine that you do it even when you mean to go somewhere else. It can be the football game on Sunday afternoon that cues the chips and beer. It can be feeling hungry or tired or being treated rudely. Identifying the cue for a habit gives us options to either change the routine or pursue a different reward. As it turns out, once you know the formula, changing a habit or creating a new one is not as hard as you imagined. And then it gets really interesting.

When Paul O'Neill became the CEO of financially struggling ALCOA— he understood the power of habits and announced that he was going to focus on only one thing – worker safety. This was not what the shareholders wanted to hear, some sold their stock that day. Big mistake! O'Neill made it a rule that any injury had to be reported to him within 24 hours. He insisted that it become an Alcoa habit. It didn't take long for the rewards to become known. Management also had to make regular reports about new safety measures and their effectiveness. Everyone was empowered to make safety suggestions. Creating one institutional habit eventually changed the entire ALCOA culture. Better safety increased production; worker satisfaction led to less absenteeism. The habit of injury reporting became a keystone habit which created a cascading progression of new good habits and creativity grew. Alcoa became one of the safest companies to work for, the unions were happy, management was happy. Within 10 years, Alcoa's worth had increased 5 fold.

Christianity requires new habits. The world says look out for #1; Jesus says your neighbor is a cue for the habit of generosity and love. The world arms itself and Jesus teaches non-violence. The world says buy, Jesus says give. The world says be afraid, Jesus says put your trust in my way. The challenge for us is to really understand the rewards and make them known in such a way that others will discover the craving within themselves for love, belonging, connection, peace and joy.

2012 ended in a flurry of grief with a clear need to find a different way. To lead the world into new things, to create new habits, we need to be thoughtful and courageous, willing to examine the habits of our spirituality. Epiphany requires a courageous response. The aching world outside these walls needs someone to show them the way.

Welcome to 2013, Epiphany people.