

## **A Sermon for The First Sunday after The Epiphany, January 11, 2026**

*The Epistle, Romans 12:1-5 - The Gospel, St. Luke 2:41-52*

*The Rt. Rev'd Stephen C. Scarlett*

In our Epiphany season readings we revisit notable events in which God revealed himself. The wise men are led to Jesus by a star. The Spirit descends upon Jesus in his baptism and in the Transfiguration. Jesus appears to Paul on the Damascus Road. Jesus turns water into wine at Cana. In the light of these, we might wonder why the story of the twelve year old Jesus exasperating his parents is an Epiphany season gospel.

One justification is chronological. Christmas was about infant Jesus. The visit of magi to the perhaps two year old Jesus on Epiphany was the next event in sequence. Today we get the twelve year old Jesus. Next week we get the baptism of the thirty or so year old Jesus.

But the gospel is also an Epiphany. Jesus was revealed to Mary and Joseph as the Son of God in a new way—as the envy of every twelve year old who would love to pull rank on scolding parents: “Didn’t you know I had to be about my Father’s business?” This story illustrates a common epiphany pattern. Jesus doesn’t do what we want or expect him to do. As a result, we are forced to look at God and life in a new way.

The New Testament often presents revelation through the metaphor of light. We are in the dark and light shines so that we can “see” what was previously hidden. Thus on Easter Mary Magdalene looked at Jesus but did not recognize him. Then Jesus spoke her name as an act of revelation. The light was turned on and she saw him.

The most intriguing New Testament word for revelation is “apocalypse.” It has an ominous sense of destruction in English, derived from the vivid images of judgment contained in the last book of the New Testament, which is Revelation or, literally, Apocalypse. However, in the Bible, apocalypse means to uncover something that is hidden so that we can see its true nature. In Revelation things are uncovered so that we can see the world as it really is from the perspective of God’s throne—and not as it appears to be to people who can only see the physical world. In this sense, the story of the twelve year old Jesus was apocalyptic. A disruption in the normal family pattern uncovered Jesus’ true identity.

We prefer enlightenment epiphanies, but God’s pattern of revelation is more frequently apocalyptic, especially as we grow in the faith. Miracles and moments of insight may prompt beginning faith, but there is a danger in them. We come to expect that challenges will always be solved by miraculous intervention, and we become disappointed when they aren’t.

The movement from the miraculous to the apocalyptic is common in the Bible. Take St. Paul for example. He was converted when Jesus personally appeared to him on the Damascus Road. In his ministry he conquered deadly snakes and cast out demons. But later on, God revealed himself to Paul in a different and disconcerting way. Paul records this revelation in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9. He writes,

To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations [I received], a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

This was an apocalypse, an uncovering of new meaning. Pride is the great danger, and weakness that must depend on Christ is strength. We cannot see this with the naked eye. We need a revelation, an apocalypse.

Our real problem is not a lack of miracle solutions. Our real problem is that we do not see what God is doing because we are focused on our temporal concerns. We have a plan and we want God to bless it and prosper it. It's a good plan, if only God will get on board!

Now, we can misunderstand the concept of apocalypse to mean that God takes away what we really want. This misses the point. The temporal things we fixate on and relentlessly pursue do not give us what we really want. This is the world's captivity to sin apart from God. People pursue pleasure, power, money, health, and "happiness" apart from God. They end up more anxious and discontented. Then all is lost by death.

Only by teaching us detachment from this world can God teach us to rightly enjoy this world. The good things of this world are sacramental. They are signs of God's goodness and of his present and coming kingdom. If we see the good things of this world in the right way, we will be able to both enjoy them and let go of them. The apocalyptic uncovers the temporality of this world, and helps us to reorient our lives around the kingdom and the things that remain (Rev. 3:2).

To receive an apocalypse we must develop "contemplative vision." To contemplate means to prayerfully examine things to discern or see their true meaning. Contemplative vision assumes we cannot see, and asks God to uncover things for us so that we can see them as they really are. Mary the mother of Jesus is the preeminent example of this kind of vision. In the gospel, St. Luke tells that Mary and Joseph, "did not understand the saying that [Jesus] spoke to them." But Luke says that Mary "treasured up all these things in her heart." Mary thought and prayed about what she had experienced and heard until she was able to see their meaning.

As we move away from insisting that God act as we want and expect, and move toward the practice of contemplative vision after the pattern of Mary, we discover that God is continuously making himself known to us by means of revelation or apocalypse. Thus, St. Paul exhorts us in the epistle: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2).