

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z1, T2
The Feast of the Epiphany 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 6 January 2019

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Feuerbach Epiphany

"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy..." (Mt. 2).

In January 2007 on massive fairgrounds outside of Addis Ababa, our family celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany with the patriarch of Ethiopia. There were tens of thousands of other faithful Christians there. I remember hundreds of empty plastic water bottles launched through the air for priests to fill with holy water for healing friends and family who could not be present. Although the crowds seemed overwhelming they were only a tiny fraction of the planet's two billion Christians. This Epiphany around the world we read Matthew's story about the Magi following the light from the East, seeking a divine child.

The word epiphany comes from the Greek word (epi-phanero) meaning "to shine upon," to show, to reveal. We see God's light in this child. This light does not come from another place. It is not foreign to the world. It is a light that is already here. It is a light we see more clearly through the person of Jesus. The Apostle John writes that this, "light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn. 1:5). It is the light that lies at the source of all things, from which all things come. Every person in that huge crowd of Ethiopians, each of you, has this light in your heart.

Look around today. This light shines through the rain falling on the cypress trees at Land's End. It shines through every creature, each new blade of grass. The mountains, the soil, stones and elements born out of a thousand suns have this light in them, as does the vast ocean and our sheltering atmosphere.

Maybe this light seems perfectly obvious and even luminous to you this morning. Or perhaps you are having difficulty making it out because of your busyness, worries, anger, or sadness. This light shines in the Christ child. This epiphany can help us to see the world freshly again; it can make this the first day of creation.¹

The story of the magi is about taking a risk. It is about leaving home and facing danger to seek out the light. This light has such important political consequences that it can become a matter of life and death. Strangely enough, sometimes when we listen to our dreams we become the means by which the light is preserved.

This morning I want to metaphorically leave home with you and consider the ideas of one of the most intelligent critics of Christianity in history, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). Understanding his thought involves a risk and a journey that may help us to be more carefully attuned to the light.

Feuerbach was the nineteenth century German thinker who inspired the atheism of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche. He himself was a student of the German philosopher Hegel (1770-1830). Because he lived in a vastly different time, and responded to very different political and cultural circumstances, some of his ideas may be hard for us to understand.²

Feuerbach thought of himself as a kind of modern day Martin Luther (1483-1546).³ He hoped to inspire a religious revolution in the same way that Luther did. Although he continues to inspire atheists, Feuerbach would not have described himself as an atheist. According to him the question of whether God exists or not belonged to the sixteenth and seventeenth century. For him, modern people should be talking about what they mean by God. When atheists confront me today I do my best to say the same thing. Most of what they reject about God (as an old man living in the sky) is not what I believe either.

I really appreciate this about Feuerbach. Even as the foremost critic of Christianity in the last two centuries he does not regard religion as entirely wrong. He recognizes a kind of truth in Christianity. He just believes that Christians fundamentally misunderstand it.

Feuerbach writes, "Religion is the dream of the human mind. But even in dreams we do not find ourselves in emptiness or in heaven, but on earth, in the realm of reality."⁴ In other words he believes Christianity is made up of something real. According to Feuerbach Christians take the best elements of human nature, the finest qualities of our species and then project them outside of ourselves on to a God which we falsely believe is separate from us.

He writes, "Theology is anthropology," "the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species." God to Feuerbach is an objectified and idealized version of the qualities of our species. Human beings are creative, powerful, capable of fairness, morality, intelligence and love. God is the perfection of these qualities. According to Feuerbach we just need to realize that God is not separate from us.

For Feuerbach this mistake about God leads Christians to falsely choose faith over love. He believes that we are more concerned about protecting God's honor than about

actually loving other people. In his words “the highest commandment [for Christians]... is Believe!” when it should be to love.

Clearly Feuerbach has been hurt by Christians. He hates their arrogance.⁵ He criticizes them for being so concerned about the afterlife that they do not seem to care much about those around them except as a means for getting into heaven.

If we can hear these criticisms I wonder if they could make our faith stronger and clearer, maybe even truer. This is not new. For twenty centuries we have been aware of tendencies in the faith toward superiority, false pride, self-centeredness and otherworldliness.⁶

Still the Christianity that Feuerbach describes seems foreign to me. My faith is not primarily about God’s honor or what happens in the afterlife. I don’t think it makes me feel superior to others. Christianity for me is a way of receiving God’s gifts. It is living in gratitude for something other than my own ego. It is trying to act as a partner with God. It is being engaged with God in healing the world. The problem is that maintaining this frame of mind and living for others isn’t always easy.

I have two primary criticisms of Feuerbach. First, he doesn't seem to understand what it means to be human. There is a rational part of us but there is so much more too – our desires, dreams and subconscious. We don't totally control our inner life. He offers a kind of unintentional idolatry. John Calvin described the human mind as “a factory of idols.” Without the real God we make our own gods. Feuerbach does this explicitly. In our time this too easily becomes a kind of narcissism, a self-centeredness that feels no need to really be accountable to others. Being a child of God means first of all being responsible to creation.

My second problem with Feuerbach is that he presents such a small vision of the world. Its narrow attention to the human condition seems like a kind of wishful thinking that exaggerates our individual power and freedom. In exchange for this control Feuerbach seems to give up the possibility for real awe, gratitude, and the transcendent. I hear God speaking to me every day. Perhaps for this reason it seems far more likely to me that Feuerbach is projecting “Not-God” on to the universe than I am simply imagining God.

The author George Saunders in an interview tries to express this when he says that he, “doesn’t buy the humanist verities anymore.” For him when we consider our own death we realize that these truths are only, “a subset of what’s true.” He goes on, “It would be so weird if we knew just as much as we needed to know to answer all the questions of the universe... Whereas the probability is high that there is a vast reality that we have no

way to perceive, that's actually bearing down on us now and influencing everything. The idea of saying, 'Well I can't see it, therefore we don't need to see it,' seems really weird to me."⁷

Before us today we have two choices for how we will see the world. We can regard it as chiefly a dark and silent place. In this picture we are isolated in our own heads, bravely facing a silent universe, free to do whatever we will. For people who see the world this way there is nothing higher than our own consciousness, no true companions – just a dead world and dumb luck.

Or we can choose to seek out the light, to notice it in every unexpected event, every form we come across and even to cultivate it in ourselves. We can receive the bread and wine, the hymns and praise that bring us closer to God.

A child changes your life. As a graduate student, I kept a journal for the first two years after we became parents. The light is on every page. Here is a random example (from 9 February 2001, 12 July 2000). "How could a day like this be improved? Micah is growing. He talks about surfing all the time." "If only people were given an advisory angel instead of a guardian angel. This angel would alert us to give thanks for the irreplaceable moments in our lives which pass slowly by like leaves, floating... on the river of time, and then gone forever."

Rabbis tell the story of Moses. After killing a man and fleeing into exile Moses was working for his father-in-law as a shepherd (Gen. 2-3). I do not know how much Moses misses his old life, whether he feels sorry for himself or just grateful to be alive, but one day, God's angel appears to him in a bush. It seems to be burning, but not consumed by the fire. Perhaps what matters is not that the bush is burning but that Moses notices it.

I believe that every bush is burning; every thing and every moment is alive with the light of God. The world around us shines because God is at its heart. The light that the magi recognize and follow in the star is the light we seek also. The light they see in the baby Jesus can change our lives forever too.

Let us pray:

Dazzle us with your light O God. Draw us into the holy fire of your mystery. May the light of Christ transform our hearts so that we can begin again our work of healing the world and shine anew. Amen.⁸

¹ This paragraph and story about Moses were influenced by John Philip Newell, "The Light Within All Life," Day 1, 6 January 2013, http://day1.org/4403-the_light_within_all_life

² Feuerbach's teacher Hegel had a kind of evolutionary view of history. He believed in what he called Spirit or Mind which was both above and expressed through human culture and institutions. As human beings become more modern they become more explicitly conscious of Spirit. For Feuerbach who rejected much of Hegelian Idealism, the important spirit was the awareness that we project the values of our human species onto a being that is exterior to us rather than recognizing this godliness as our own inner nature. Marx took this idea of historical development and used it as the basis for his idea of historical materialism and the inevitability of certain economic and political relations.

³ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, Volume 1: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), 223.

⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*. Tr. George Eliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), xix, xvii, 270, 260.

⁵ "Faith is arrogant, but it is distinguished from natural arrogance in this, that it clothes its feeling of superiority, its pride, in the idea of another person, for whom the believer is an object of particular favour..." Ibid., 250.

⁶ Again though, as is the case with many atheists, what Feuerbach criticizes is what many orthodox Christians would describe as heresy anyway. The Christian tradition includes exactly these self-criticisms (we have words for them like antinomianism, quietism, gnosticism, etc.).

⁷ Joel Lovell, "George Saunders Has Written the Best Book You'll Read this Year," *The New York Times* 3 January 2013.

⁸ See Mary Oliver, "The Ponds." <http://www.poetry-chaihana.com/O/OliverMary/Ponds.htm>