

Last Epiphany Year A 2026

Today is the last Sunday in Epiphany. There were only six Sundays in Epiphany this year. That's because Easter comes early. There can be as many as nine Sundays in Epiphany depending on the date of Easter. There is a formula for finding Easter day in the Book of Common Prayer. Easter Day is always on the Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox on March 21, a date which is fixed in accordance with an ancient ecclesiastical computation, and which does not always correspond to the astronomical equinox. The full moon may happen on any date between March 21 and April 18 inclusive. If the full moon falls on a Sunday, Easter day is the following Sunday. But Easter day cannot be earlier than March 22, or later than April 25.

There are two points of reference to find the date of Easter, the golden number and the Sunday letter. The golden number indicates the date of the full moon on or after the spring equinox of March 21, according to a nineteen year cycle. These numbers are prefixed in the calendar to the days of the month from March 22 to April 18 inclusive. In the present calendar they are applicable from A.D. 1900 to A.D. 2099, after which they will change.

The Sunday letter identifies the days of the year when Sundays occur. After every date in the Calendar a letter appears from A to g. Thus, if January First falls on a Sunday, the Sunday letter for the year is A, and every date in the Calendar marked with an A is a Sunday, and so on through the seven letters. In leap years, however, the Sunday letter changes on the first day of March. In such years, when A is the Sunday letter, this applies only to

Sundays in January and February, and g is the Sunday letter for the rest of the year. Or if D is the Sunday letter, then C is the Sunday letter on and after March 1.... Got it?? I'm not making this up. There's actually more to the formula... I'm guessing the monks who worked this formula up had a whole lot of time on their hands. But I imagine that this formula has its roots in ancient fertility rites that far preceded Christianity. So if you want to decipher the date for Easter over the next thirty or so years, you have the formula... or, we actually have the dates through 2051 in the Prayer Book... or you can just call Molly and ask.

So here we are at the last Sunday of Epiphany... based on all that; and it is customary, on this day, according to the lectionary, that we read the account of the Transfiguration. That narrative also exists in Mark and Luke, so it's an important story. Today we read from Matthew's Gospel, since we are in year A of the lectionary. Matthew has packed his brief account of the transfiguration with a boat load of typology. Typology, as you know, is when the writer uses previous events, previous narratives, iconic figures, from the biblical history of Israel to connect the ancient scriptural tradition to the present day. It was a way to connect ancient biblical literature with the contemporary message. Matthew has Jesus and three of his disciples ascending a mountain. To any Jewish audience that would evoke the memory of Moses ascending Mt. Horeb in the Sinai desert. In Exodus, Moses climbs the mountain alone, but here Matthew has Jesus accompanied by representatives of his community. At Sinai, Moses's face glows a brilliant white signaling an intimate encounter with God. Matthew has Jesus's face and clothes aglow, lest his audience misses the allusion.

Matthew also evokes the very presence of Moses and the Prophet Elijah, there on the mountain with Jesus. Moses, the giver of the Law; and Elijah the chief prophet of Israel's venerable history of prophets. All this typology means the writer is not interested in historical facts; he is interested in theology. Being atop a high mountain would place one in proximity to God. God's chief spokespersons in the tradition were Moses and Elijah. Moses prescribed the Law, the Torah, as a way for the freed Israelites to follow the laws of God in the world: Compassion, kindness, hospitality, justice... love of neighbor in short. The Law was the means of sustaining a just community. For some in the tradition, the law was the very life of God, carried in the ark amid the people. And then Elijah, the prophet, who through a prophet's authority called the powers that be to account. So, for Matthew, the spiritual life is marked by practice and critique; practicing the good, and calling out evil. Jesus of course, for Matthew is the contemporary manifestation of the faith, the heir to Moses and Elijah, rooted in the tradition; manifesting a faith of practice and critique. In other words, Jesus's ministry for Matthew is not new, but a renewal of Israel's call since the beginning.

We, the church, are called to continue that ministry as the raised body of Christ. And alas, the church falls short. 153 bishops just recently signed a statement decrying the violence perpetrated by our own government upon innocent citizens. But more than half of those bishops are retired. Less than half of all active bishops signed the statement. The majority, including our bishop, chose not to sign on. What kind of message does that send?

It is nothing less than a failure to live into our prophetic witness. Our bishop made a statement to the clergy of our diocese saying that his first priority is to guard the unity of the church. I say, not at the expense of the truth; not at the expense of the Gospel that calls us to love our neighbor; that calls us to critique the powers that be when they act contrary to the well-being of its people they govern. Our silence is complicity.

On the mountaintop, the disciples are so caught up in such a heady revelation, that they want to memorialize the experience, savor the vision; but that is not to be. They must descend the mountain, back into the world of time... of men and women; a world wracked by the abuse of power: poverty, violence; a world struggling with its very mortality. It is as if Matthew is saying that the glory of God is not found in the ecstasy of knowledge or revelation; it is not found in our notions of self-sufficiency; God's glory is found among the broken lives of our world in intimate proximity.

I have a close friend, now a former priest, who was a class behind me in seminary. Several years ago he entered an experimental program at M.I.T. exploring the effects of hallucinogens on the religious experience. As he describes it, he had a mountain top encounter with God; and now he devotes all his time promoting the availability, and arguing for the legality of hallucinogens used for the enlightened religious experience. I don't doubt his sincerity, but I want to say to my friend that we can't stay on the mountaintop. We can't rest upon our privilege and self-sufficiency. We are called to the ordinary but gloriously complex world of broken humanity.

Our post-modern, individualistic culture would have us believe otherwise. Our culture would have us believe that the religious enterprise is all about the ascertaining and accumulation of knowledge of God. As if. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of self-help programs promising that we may have a deeper knowledge of God. And the culture also maintains that this is an individual pursuit. But both miss the mark... Our faith is in the doing. It is about sacrifice and vulnerability and telling the truth. It is the rigorous practice of serving first our neighbor who suffers. The irony is that there is, in truth, deep knowledge found in the practice of the faith... but, a knowledge that surpasses our understanding. It is a knowledge informed by experience; and that knowledge goes deep and shapes us into the very vessels God can use.

Matthew will, at the end of his Gospel, drive home the point: "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick... and did not minister to you? And the Lord will answer. Truly I say to you, as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." Our calling, good people, is among God's people. We bear God's life to a world struggling with itself. And though it doesn't have the allure and thrill of the mountaintop...it is yet a high calling.... The highest calling.