

It's a new year with new opportunities for some, new goals for others, and for all of us the possibility of some new drama in politics, business, or other areas of common life. We've even seen some headlines about Quincy recently, because a couple of weeks ago Boston Mayor Marty Walsh announced that he wants to rebuild the Long Island Bridge; the bridge connecting one of Boston Harbor's largest islands with the mainland; the bridge that was torn down 3 years ago for safety concerns; the bridge, owned by the city of Boston, that can only be accessed here in Quincy. It's the perfect setup for some drama.

A new bridge would certainly support social services. Long Island *used* to provide a homeless shelter with more than 400 beds. Long Island *used* to provide recovery services for 300 people struggling with addiction. When the old bridge came down all those social services scattered too. And two weeks ago Mayor Walsh said, "*Nothing short of re-centering and expanding our entire system of care will do.*"<sup>1</sup> The key to everything according to Mayor Walsh is a new bridge.

But there's another side to the conversation. Some say a new bridge is too expensive, costing anywhere from \$40m-\$100m. Others are suspicious about the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2018/01/08/new-bridge-recovery-long-island/KzOXeJXX8cN8cI0AyWSePM/story.html>

motivation.<sup>2</sup> Support services for homelessness & addiction are surely needed, but is that really the motivation? Maybe the bridge is just a gateway to new housing with some of the best views of Boston — and price tags to go with it.

No one can say for sure what motivations are driving the conversation. But this much is clear: any new bridge would eventually transform *both* sides. That's how bridges work. They introduce new possibilities and challenges for both sides. That's why this conversation includes both hope & fear. Is a new bridge actually the key to re-centering our system of care, or is it just a convenient gateway to more revenue? It's the perfect setup for some drama.

In today's Gospel: *Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,"* (Jn. 1.51). This is this season of Epiphany; the season between Christmas & Lent when we celebrate God's revelation in Christ to the world. And today John's Gospel invites us to see Jesus as a bridge between heaven and earth; a bridge between God's space and our space. Of course, the whole world is already God's space — but during Epiphany we're invited to see Jesus as the one who makes God visible in our world. We could say, he's the key to re-centering our entire vision of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2018/01/08/mayor-walsh-should-tell-more-about-his-big-idea-for-long-island/ggfBXLOW0tzhLpZuODBFKJ/story.html>

God. That's our invitation during Epiphany.

Last week Fr. Litman reminded us that Epiphany traditionally includes 3 events: visitation of the Magi as God's manifestation to all nations, baptism as God's manifestation of Jesus as the new Israel, changing water into wine as the manifestation of a new fruitfulness in our relationship with God. Each of these epiphanies invite us into deeper reflection on God's appearance in Jesus.

We even have a hymn that invites us into these mysteries: *Songs of thankfulness and praise, Jesus, Lord, to thee we raise, Manifested by the star to the sages from afar... Manifest at Jordan's stream, Prophet, Priest, and King supreme; And at Cana wedding guest In the God-head manifest; Manifest in pow'r divine, Changing water into wine; Anthems be to Thee addressed, God in man made manifest.*<sup>3</sup>

That's our invitation for reflection during Epiphany, *God in man made manifest*. Today that invitation comes in the image of Jesus as a bridge between heaven & earth. It's a vision that includes both hope & fear. Because if Jesus really is God made manifest in creation, then he's going to introduce new possibilities and challenges in our world. Conversations about the divinity of Jesus are always

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<sup>3</sup> *The Hymnal 1982*, #135

filled with hope & fear because they're conversations about the possibility of God's space transforming our space; maybe even transforming us. Even more shocking is the possibility that God opens himself to new challenges in the Incarnation of Jesus. Because that's how bridges work. They always create possibilities for transformation on both sides.

It would be one thing if Jesus simply bridged heaven & earth with his teaching; with his words. But honestly, God's people had been living with God made manifest in words for thousands of years before Jesus. That's what the story of Samuel is about. 1 Samuel is about the possibilities & challenges of living with God's word. Samuel was born long after Abraham, when God spoke words of blessing to the people of Israel. He was also born long after Moses, when God spoke 10 Words — or Commandments — to govern God's people. Samuel was born millennia after God's people had been living with God's word as the bridge between heaven & earth.

But today, at the beginning of our reading we hear, "The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread," (1Sam. 3.1). In other words, God's people had closed off or torn down the bridge of God's word & God's life. In the days of Samuel, we hear, their priests were blind, unwise, and infirm, just

like old Eli. And Samuel's story is about the transformation of God's people when they open their ears again to God's word. "As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground," (1Sam. 3.19).

God's word has always been a bridge between heaven & earth, creating new possibilities & challenges in our world. According to one theologian: "The fundamental conviction of our faith is not so much that God is, as that God speaks.... Learning to discern the difference between human words and God's word is," one of the fundamental journeys of our faith.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus did come to speak God's word (cf. Jn. 5.30), but today's vision in the Gospel is about more than speaking God's word. It's about embodying God's word. It's an epiphany of the Word made flesh as a living bridge (Jn. 1.14) between heaven & earth. For the earliest Christians, this vision of Jesus as a living bridge became both a great consolation and also a great challenge. Consolation because God had personally connected heaven & earth. Challenge because they had to figure out what new possibilities this bridge introduced into their lives.

And today in our Epistle, we hear Paul wrestling with some early Christians who are trying to figure that out. Best we can tell these Christians in the city of

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 38.

Corinth — ancient Greece — thought that's God's new bridge meant they were liberated from any constraint. They could act however they wanted, sleep around however they wanted; treat sex no different than snacking. They thought it was a one-way bridge. They were no longer slaves to restraint, but free to indulge their passions because they thought Jesus was a one-way bridge to divine power.

And Paul says their image of divine power is all wrong. He says divine power doesn't mean a free ticket to indulge our passion. That's not what God is like. He says God isn't just revealed by Jesus, our God is exactly like Jesus. And if we're following Jesus then being a Christian doesn't mean receiving God's power as a toy to use however we like.

The mystery of the Incarnation means the Church — you & I — become God's manifestation in the world. The mystery is that, as we follow Jesus, we too become *God in humanity made manifest*. We too become a living bridge between heaven & earth so that we too can share God's transforming & healing love. Paul says our body, individually & together, is a bridge for union with God & one another. So Paul reminds us, *glorify God in your body* (1Cor. 6.20).

The Church has never simply been a ragtag group of people who enjoy getting together on Sunday. If we're honest, sometimes we don't even like each

other. That's okay. As long as we remember that we're called to become a bridge to God. We don't always have to like each other to become God's bridge. But we do have to love each other. We do have to serve each other; especially those people we're inclined not to like very much.

Individually and together, we're meant to embody a powerful hope for the world. Hold your breath and hang onto your seats. Because all people in all nations, wherever they are and whatever they're experiencing, are invited to look at us — the Church — as a bridge between heaven & earth. Whether or not they ever step inside this building, we're meant to capture the world's attention with our worship and our love. In our individual & collective body we're meant to let everyone know that here, in this humble community of Jesus followers, is the very house of God & the very bridge of heaven. *Amen.*