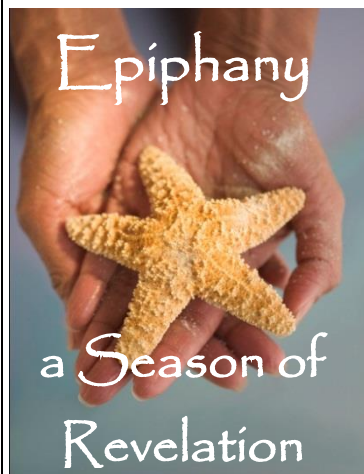


Discussion Questions:
(for individual meditation or small group discussion)

Thinking about the various definitions of the word symbol, and this “new” symbol of the nautilus shell, what are your responses to these questions?

1. What symbol(s) has meant the most to your faith experience?
2. What does that symbol point to for you? What is its meaning in your life experience?
3. Does this symbol have the same impact or meaning to someone much younger than you? How about to someone much older than you?
4. Look again at the image of the nautilus shell. Imagine that a stranger approaches you on Boston Common and asks why that spiral is above the church. What could you say about it? What do YOU think the image points to spiritually?

These Epiphany Papers are written by Amy Cook, Missioner for Education, Formation and Discipleship in the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts; and the Very Rev. John P. Streit, Dean of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Boston. All scripture taken from the NRSV version. Epiphany Papers are produced by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, 138 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111.



What is this New Thing?

Epiphany Paper #3:

New Symbols of Faith

Epiphany is the manifestation of Christ to the peoples of the earth. The winter solstice was kept on Jan. 6 at some places during the first centuries of the Christian Era. In opposition to pagan festivals, Christians chose this day to celebrate the various manifestations, or "epiphanies," of Jesus' divinity. These showings of his divinity included his birth, the coming of the Magi, his baptism, and the Wedding at Cana where he

miraculously changed water into wine. The day was called "The Feast of Lights." Celebration of the Son of God replaced celebration of the sun. Baptisms were done, and a season of preparation was instituted.

[Taken from the Office of Liturgy and Music for the Episcopal Church]

Our Cathedral has new artwork. For this season of Epiphany, this series will explore themes of Christian symbols, old and new, and spiritual growth using scripture, poetry and a newly produced video about the sculpture on the cathedral pediment. We invite participants to explore the Light of Christ breaking into our world today in new ways and think about new symbols of faith and spiritual formation as we ask "What is this new thing that God is doing?"

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19)

Please use this series of papers for discussion or personal study. We encourage parishes to print these out to put into bulletins, place at the back of the church or on tables at coffee hour, or email out to parishioners and friends.

New Symbols of Faith

There is an old joke that says a teacher gave her class a "show and tell" assignment. She told the students to bring in an object that represented their religion. The first student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Esther. I am Jewish and this is a Star of David." The second student got up and said, "My name is Joseph. I am a Catholic and this is a Rosary." The third student got up and said, "My name is Madison. I am Episcopalian, and this is a casserole." So what is a symbol? Merriam-Webster says this:

. . . something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance; especially: a visible sign of something invisible. . .

So when we think specifically of “symbols of faith” we think of the things we associate with our church, our liturgical practices and our beliefs. But what happens when those symbols no longer communicate to a wider audience, or suggest and point to something other than the original intent? Do we need new symbols?

The Nautilus

The Nautilus shell is certainly “new” in the sense of a symbol in our churches. Many people walking by the Cathedral Church of St. Paul don’t immediately think “church” when they see the nautilus design. However, if they saw a cross or a statue of Mary, or any other number of well-known Christian symbols, would people stop in their tracks?



The theologian Paul Tillich said in his work “Dynamics of Faith”:

Symbols have one characteristic in common with signs; they point beyond themselves to something else. The red sign at the street corner points to the order to stop the movements of cars at certain intervals...

One characteristic of a symbol is that it opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us. All arts create symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way. A picture and a poem reveal elements of reality which cannot be approached scientifically. In the creative work of art we

encounter reality in a dimension which is closed for us without such works.

... Another characteristic of a symbol is that it not only opens up dimensions and elements of reality which otherwise would remain unapproachable but also unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality.¹

When interviewed, Donald Lipski, the artist who created the Nautilus sculpture at the cathedral said this about his process:

The idea came to him right away, Lipski said, as he began to think about the cathedral church's mission as "a house of prayer for all people."

"I wanted to find a symbol, an image, that would speak to everyone and be beautiful. The spiral came to mind really almost immediately because I started to think of the classical proportions of a Greek temple, based on the [mathematical] golden rectangle which yields the spiral," Lipski told a group of potential donors gathered at the cathedral church for a preview in late March.

"The spiral is the most ubiquitous shape in the universe. It's in the movement of subatomic particles and it's in the vastness of galaxies. So if you're thinking about God, or even if you don't believe in God, the spiral, I think, can still speak to people," Lipski said.²



¹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

² Article by Tracy J. Sukraw, June 12, 2012, <http://www.diomass.org/diocesan-news/something-old-something-new-cathedral-church-st-paul-unveils-bold-proposal>