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An Anti-Oppression Lessons & Carols for Epiphany: *praying our way toward transformation*

Praying shapes believing. So we Anglicans believe, and so we practice. That makes our prayers a critically important part of our formation as followers of Jesus Christ and participants with God in overcoming our fragmentation and alienation and restoring us to each other and to God.

St. James's Episcopal Church in Cambridge has long has a particularly diverse congregational membership. We proclaim it with joy on our website, *"Welcome to St. James's Episcopal Church in Cambridge, MA, a community known for its diversity, enthusiasm and joy in the Gospel."* But as much as we have enjoyed the great panoply of traditions and experience embodied in our many-colored, many-originated, many-oriented, many-resourced and many-aged congregation, we haven't always been emboldened to explore that diversity at much depth, preferring to keep things friendly rather than open to what might prove to be painful wounds of difference or uncomfortable divergences of privilege.

We realized this with particular poignancy when the Rev. Edwin Johnson joined our leadership in 2010, so that our two clergy were both highly educated & straight but otherwise about as different as could be – Holly Antolini, white, identified as female, older, privileged in just about every way a person can be except by gender; Edwin, Afro-Costa-Rican, young, raised in Roxbury by a single mom, identified as male. Taking Edwin's arrival as a moment of opportunity, St. James's Cambridge decided to form an Anti-Oppression Team in 2011, and with the help of a diocesan Congregational Development Grant, received training from VISIONS, Inc. – the organization that had long resourced the Episcopal Divinity School's core "Foundations" curriculum in training leaders to *"serve and advance God's mission of justice, compassion, and reconciliation"* in the church, focusing primarily on *"racism as one of the major manifestations of oppression facing U.S. society and the church today and its connections to other forms of injustice."*

At St. James's the Vestry decided to include all forms of oppression – not just the social construct of race – in the scope of our concern. We began to listen to the experiences of our diverse congregation members with greater attention, openness and depth in the "grace margin" of safety our VISIONS training helped open in us. We began to notice more acutely biblical passages offering narratives of liberation. We began to hear our prayers differently. And all of this picked up

urgency after Michael Brown's death in Ferguson Missouri in the summer of 2014, and the birth of the "Black Lives Matter" movement.



So when it came time for our Worship Planning Team to prepare our annual Lessons & Carols for the Feast of Epiphany in January of 2015 – a tradition of ours that had already replaced the more traditional Advent or Christmas Lessons & Carols – we listened to the Collect for Epiphany with fresh ears: *“O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face...”* Suddenly, it resonated like a call from God to highlight our anti-oppression work with a liturgy oriented around it: ALL the peoples of the earth should have voice, receive our attention and concern, because any and all diversities, in the power of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, can lead us to encounter God's glory face-to-face. So, keeping at the center of the feast the story of the foreigners from the East bearing gifts to acknowledge the babe in the manger as the Savior of the world before most of his own people could recognize him, we began to gather around it stories from throughout Scripture that, one after another, told of how people are excluded and persecuted for being different, yet God reaches out to them and in them are discovered crucial gifts needed by the people. Ruth was one. Hagar another. The Ethiopian eunuch in the Book of Acts still another.

And between these stories, we inserted songs – some of them very traditional, some of them liberation songs from our own African-American tradition, and some of them new to many of us, even a few composed by our own Minister of Music Pat Michaels – that seemed to capture the pain of being excluded, the sense of adventure, challenge, & revelation we'd experienced in our anti-oppression work, and the determination to continue to counter prejudice

wherever its ugly disenfranchisement raised its head, even in the intimacy of our own beloved congregational family.

Here's the refrain we sing in response to each petition of the Prayers of the People in our ever-evolving Anti-Oppression Lessons & Carols for Epiphany, composed by Pat Michaels. Perhaps it is, among all the prayers of our Lessons & Carols, the prayer that sums up the hope in our commitment to undo oppression in all its forms, as "*we seek and serve Christ in every single human being*" so that God is revealing God's own self in the beautiful diversity of our humanity:

*Great, living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
closer yet than breathing,
everlasting home,
Hail and Hosanna,
great, living God!*

If you're curious about this liturgy and how it shapes our believing and – we deeply pray and hope – our acting in the world, or how you might design your own, come to our St. Paul's Cathedral at 138 Tremont St. on Saturday January 6th at 1 PM and pray these Lessons and sing these Carols with us!

As Shirley Erena Murray's very different version of the "We Three Kings" carol says, "*Wise is each one of us, looking for change,
star-gazer people, respecting the strange,
inner and outer worlds open to light,
centered on seeing the real and the right.
Wise ones keep journeying, all through their days,
bringing their gifts to the source of their praise,
risking the promise with all they hold dear,
seeking God's peace at the door of the year.*"