

# SHARING STORIES FROM HARD TIMES



**Epiphany's Adult Forums for Winter, 2022**

## **January 9, 2022: “Faith In Hard Times”**

*The scriptures on hard times:* “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” Matthew 7:24-27

People of faith have always gone through hard times. How do we get through them? What does our faith tell us about getting through periods of suffering?

*Questions:* We’ve all been through some hard times lately: personally and as families, a faith community, and a society. What has sustained you during these times? Has your spiritual practice changed? Do you sense yourself growing spiritually as a result of weathering these times?

*For further reflection:* Think about some of the times of personal struggle in your life. What did you learn from them? How did they change you? Did they strengthen your relationship with God, weaken it, neither? Ask God to use the challenges you face to draw you deeper into God’s own compassionate heart.

## **January 16, 2022: “A Learning Church”**

*The scriptures on learning:* “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” Matthew 13:52

Doyt speaks often of Epiphany as a “learning church.” What does that mean for us, how do we experience it, and how does it help us in our spiritual journey?

*Questions:* In what ways do you experience Epiphany as a learning church? Is this the kind of church you were used to before you came here? What are some new things you’ve learned since coming to Epiphany? What other learning opportunities would you like to see offered here?

*For further reflection:* What part does “study” play in your spiritual life? Do you focus on studying scriptures, theology, world affairs, something else? What sources do you use: scripture, books, news media, podcasts, learning retreats or courses online or in person? Is there something you feel drawn to study, but haven’t yet gotten into? How might your learning be a gift to the Epiphany community?

## **January 23, 2022: “Transformation”**

*The scriptures on transformation:* “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 12:2

Growth in Christ is about being transformed. This often happens slowly, though life sometimes brings us to “hinge moments” where an event, a sudden realization, or something else can cause significant growth to occur.

*Questions:* What have been some of the major catalysts for spiritual growth in your life? Where are the places where your spiritual journey seemed to shift direction? What were the fruits of that shift?

*For further reflection:* If someone were writing your biography, what might they highlight as some of the “themes” of your life? That is, what would they say your life was “about”? If you were not a person of faith, would those themes be different? How did these things become important in your life, and where do you see God in this process?

## **February 6, 2022: “Death and New Life”**

*The scriptures on death and resurrection:* “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” John 12:24-25

Life, suffering, death, and resurrection—the “Paschal Mystery”—are not just the story of Christ, but a pattern that repeats itself in our own lives, in the church, and in the world. Suffering and death are inevitable, but so is the emergence of new and more beautiful life.

*Questions:* Considering the Church as a whole, or Epiphany, or both, what things have died during the pandemic? Are we better off without them? Here at Epiphany, what things would you say we need to hold onto, what needs to go, and what needs to be reimagined?

*For further reflection:* Where do you see the pattern of the Paschal Mystery in your own life? Consider some things in your life that have died: a relationship, career aspirations, a hobby, something else you were once excited about. How have you grieved those losses? Have you seen signs of new life coming from these deaths?

## **Week 6: “Obstacles in the Life of Faith”**

*The scriptures on facing obstacles:* “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:2-4

Jesus never said this would be easy—quite the reverse. He warned us (John 16:33) that in the world we will face troubles, but reminded us that he has overcome the world.

*Questions:* What are the biggest obstacles you’ve faced in your Christian journey? When faced with those obstacles, how did you respond? Did it work out well, or does hindsight suggest a better way?

*For further reflection:* Identify one “obstacle” that comes up for you over and over. Maybe it’s a temptation, or a spiritual practice that you’re not very disciplined about. Maybe it’s a person. Has dealing with that obstacle produced the kind of fruit in your life that James talks about? If so, how can you celebrate that? If not, what could you change in the way you meet this challenge? Is it time to get some support—from a friend, spiritual advisor, therapist...?

## **February 20, 2022: “Made for Joy”**

*The scriptures on joy:* Phil 4:4 “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

Joy is a mark of a true follower of Christ, one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Joy is different from happiness, which is contentment with our circumstances. Joy exists at the depths, and can't be shaken by bad times.

*Questions:* What are the places in your life where you experience joy? Could this kind of joy be lost? What would you do if the things you've looked to for joy disappeared? If you've experienced this before, did your joy return to you?

*For further reflection:* A thought experiment: imagine yourself getting really bad news—an unwelcome test result, a loved one's death, your house burning down. What are your first, gut-level reactions? The 14<sup>th</sup> c. anchorite and mystic Julian of Norwich famously said, “All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well.” What's the distance between your reaction to bad news and Julian's peace, which does seem to surpass understanding? Pray with that distance, and ask God to bring you to that kind of trust and peace.