

“Your Light Has Come!”

January 7, 2024

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Today we are celebrating Epiphany, the last day of the season of Christmas. Technically, it was yesterday, January 6th. Epiphany is always January 6th just like Christmas is always December 25th, the “Twelve days of Christmas.” It’s a week and a half festival that other cultures spend more time celebrating than we do. In our country we tend to limit things to just the one or maybe two days. Maybe we’re still carrying a little of the guilt instilled in us by our Puritan ancestors who outlawed Christmas altogether. The people of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies believed Christmas was just an excuse for drunkenness and debauchery. But this time of year it’s sort of nice to have a little pressure valve to let off some steam.

For Christians, of course, this is a celebration of incarnation, God becoming human in the baby Jesus. But if you look at other religions you’ll find many of them have similar festivals around this time of year. They all hover around the winter solstice, that time of the year when our planet begins to change its orientation to the sun and the encroaching darkness that’s been building for months finally reaches its peak and our sunsets start to get a little later every day. Hannukah, Diwali, Christmas, these are all festivals rooted in particular stories in their religions but share the common thread of being celebrations of light.

We modern people may not fully appreciate the power of the changing seasons, the movement from longer, darker nights to greater light. For ancient people, and for some in certain parts of the world today, getting through this time of year and moving toward spring and longer days brings relief and hope. Even though there’s still a lot of cold weather ahead and there may be some nasty storms to contend with, at least we know the days will continue to lengthen and we’ll see the sun more and more. The hold darkness had over our ancient ancestors isn’t really the same for us. We can dispel darkness by flipping a switch most of the time. And if we can’t, then we know something has gone terribly wrong.

The emergence of greater light in the world is part of the cycle of nature. In ancient times it was celebrated but it was also certain. So long as that cycle continued to function, life would go on no matter what obstacles might arise. The sun would always set and return day after day, offering new possibilities with every dawn. So when the Bible talks about the emergence of light in the life of Israel or Magi following the light of a special star, it’s not usually speaking literally. When Isaiah exhorts the people to arise and shine for their light has come, he’s not talking about sunrise. He’s inviting them to shake off the darkness that obscures God’s presence among them. And when we hear of Magi from foreign places making their way across the desert to find the child, we’re meant to look within ourselves, to find the light rising in us to dispel the darkness we carry.

For the people of Israel that darkness was decades spent in exile and then years more living among the ruins of Jerusalem. It's not easy to come to grips with your past and find your way out of the shadows and into the light. In fact, for some it may have been more comfortable living in darkness. It's much easier to blame your condition on circumstances beyond your control than admit that our actions in the world can lead to disastrous outcomes. One of the prophets in exile, Ezekiel, claimed it was the very leaders who were taken away that were responsible for Israel's defeat. They had failed to take care of their poor, just like Sodom when it was destroyed, according to him. So, a society that neglects its most vulnerable members, is a people living in darkness. Coming to terms with that reality and correcting the errors of the past is how they move into the light.

When the Magi go to Herod to learn where to find the child, they unwittingly unleash a fury of violence that plunges the region into darkness. Herod isn't interested in paying homage to the child and when the Magi don't return, he does unspeakable things to his people. Light and darkness constantly circle one another in this story, just as they do throughout the history of Israel. Just as they do for us.

I've just finished reading a book that explores some of the darkness in our country's history. It's by Robert P. Jones, titled *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future*. Jones looks at three states, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Minnesota, and traces their history from before the arrival of the Spanish, French and English colonizers when the Native populations built complex and prosperous societies through the eradication of those populations by our leaders and the introduction of enslaved African folks and then the aftermath of emancipation and Jim Crow. He draws a straight line from atrocities committed in each state by white settlers against Native Americans in the early 19th century to atrocities committed in each against African Americans in the early 20th century. All of it in the belief that white Christian Europeans were ordained by God to occupy the land and control nonwhite bodies. Jones believes the only way to heal the damage that's been done and step out of the darkness of our violent past is to shine the light of truth on what was done and face the realities of our history.

That's not an easy thing to do. When we've lived in darkness for so long, the light is painful. But if we hope to see a path forward we have to expose ourselves to the light of truth and come to terms with our past. Otherwise, we will continue to stumble around and lash out. Herod preferred darkness to light and we're told the result was carnage beyond imagining. The Magi, on the other hand, never wavered in their dedication to follow the light even though it took them far from their homes and put them on paths they'd never traveled. The people of Israel, scared for their future and overwhelmed by enormity of repairs they had to make, hesitated to move out of darkness. Isaiah demands they arise and shine. The light is waiting for them to step forward and see. See a new dawn emerge for them. They have a future where they're no longer victims, subject to the whims of other powers, but those powers will come to them with their tribute. They'll be a beacon of God's presence where "nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

That's what can happen when we step into the light. We can repair what's broken; we can make restitution for what's been stolen. We have an opportunity with each new day, with every rising sun, to see ourselves anew and take hold of the vision God offers us in Christ. For God becomes human not to enslave us or punish us but to teach us humility and compassion, to stand with us so that we can stand with others. The light revealed in Bethlehem is the light of empathy, the light that comes with understanding the pain of the world, what we endure and what we inflict. Painful as it is to step out of the darkness, God is calling us: "Your light has come!" It's time to arise and let it shine through us so the world can see and come to be healed.

Amen