

The 2nd Sunday after Christmas: Holy Trinity Church: January 2, 2022

Matthew 2: 1-12: Keep on smiling and let your light reflect Jesus

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When was the last time you had an Aha! experience? There's a word for an Aha! experience, of course. It is an epiphany. When we have an epiphany, we discover something new, something exciting. As we begin this New Year 2022 and celebrate the Epiphany in worship on Sunday, January 9 we hope to have some Aha! experiences regarding our understanding of God. Impossible, you say? You believe you already know as much about God as you're ever going to know? I find that mindset to be sad!

It reminds me of a Calvin & Hobbes cartoon years ago in which Hobbes, Calvin's stuffed tiger, asks, "Did you make any resolutions for the New Year?" Calvin becomes highly indignant and shouts, "NO! I'm fine just the way I am! Why should I change? In fact, I think it's high time the world started to change to suit ME! I don't see why I should do all the changing

around here. If the New Year requires resolutions, I say it's up to everybody else, not me! I don't need to improve! Everyone ELSE does!" After he finishes his tirade Calvin asks, "How about you? Did you make any resolutions?" Hobbes says, "Well, I had resolved to be less offended by human nature, but I think I blew it already."

It's true. Some of us think we have arrived, that we don't have any more growing and learning to do. And we think we know everything about God we are ever going to know. That would be our loss if it turns out to be true.

At the beginning of each New Year, Theologian, Howard Thurman, a professor at Boston University, would write down his understanding of God's nature. Each year, he compared last year's journal entry about the nature of God with that current year's description. And if there was no real change in his understanding of God's nature, then Professor Thurman was disappointed. He expected to grow in his knowledge and understanding of God, and if he didn't notice any spiritual growth in himself, then he considered that past year to have been wasted. Thurman, a professor of theology, didn't think he knew everything he needed to know about God. To paraphrase the popular song, "He wanted to see God more clearly, love God more dearly." How about you? Is that the sincere desire of your heart?

So, my sisters and brothers, what is your ambition in life today? Is it to get rich? Is it to make a name for yourself? Is it even to do some wonderful thing for God? Listen to me, my beloved. The highest desire that can possess any human heart is a longing to see God.

That is the meaning of Epiphany. That is the desire that drove the wise men to Bethlehem. Epiphany is the twelfth day after Christmas. According to tradition this is the day we celebrate the arrival of the wise men to worship the one who was born to be King of the Jews. The wise men followed a star until it came to the place where the young child lay. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is a wonderful story, one of the best-known stories of our faith.

The prophet Isaiah anticipated the coming of those wise men hundreds of years before. He wrote, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Herds of camels will cover your land and all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.”

These were words of prophecy. However, even Isaiah did not understand the full import of what would happen when his prophecy was fulfilled. He only prophesied what God laid on his heart. “Arise, shine, for your light has come . . .” So, what do those words mean to you your light has come? For the magi, these words represented the birth of a king. What do they mean for you?

Doesn’t the coming of light simply that the world was in darkness? “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples . . .”

Isaiah first spoke these words to the people of Jerusalem during a time of great travail for the nation. They were a captive people. Their homes and fields were ravaged and abandoned, laid desolate by the power of the Babylonian empire. But God would not abandon His people forever, counseled Isaiah. God would act on their behalf.

My brothers and sisters, darkness is a powerful metaphor. Darkness usually signifies all the things we most dread. Fear creates more and more prevalent darkness. Ignorance is associated with darkness. But here’s what’s disturbing. There will come a time, says the Bible, when people will love the darkness

more than the light. Is that time closer than we think? Usually when we think of darkness, however, it has negative connotations.

A rabbi tells of hearing a ten-year-old boy who was studying the events that are recorded in the book of Exodus. He was perplexed by the third plague which God sent, darkness over all the land. The teacher explained to the youth that the darkness in Egypt didn't affect the eyes. It affected the heart.

Physically the Egyptians could see, but in their hearts, they didn't recognize the misery that their intolerance and persecution were causing other people. The Egyptians were blind to the suffering of others. That is what is meant by the plague of darkness. No one wants to be kept "in the dark" unless they are doing evil. Darkness hides our misdeeds; light reveals our misdeeds in all their ugliness.

King Herod lived in perpetual darkness. He was ruthless: murdering his wife, his three sons, his mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle, and many others. His crowning cruelty of course was the murder of the infant boys in Bethlehem of Judea in a vain attempt to slaughter the newborn King of the Jews.

The philosopher Plato once wrote, "We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark: the real tragedy of life is when adults are afraid of the light."

Herod was afraid of the light. And so, he sought to slaughter the one about

whom John would say, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”. The world was in darkness. Ignorance and evil were both ascendant, as they are even today. But darkness will never have the last word. That is the message of Epiphany. Light has come into our world.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, we can summarize all the gospels in a few words, responded like this: “In the Bible, it gets dark, then it gets very, very dark, then Jesus shows up.” That says it all. The world was in darkness, deep darkness, but Jesus showed up.

More than two thousand years ago a tiny baby was born in Bethlehem of Judea. It may have seemed that it, too, was a tiny ray of light in a dark world, but that tiny ray of light was exactly what the world needed. And even today that light is still lighting people’s lives, helping them to move out of the darkness. I found a powerful illustration of a person moving from darkness into the light. His name is Father Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who works with gang members in East Los Angeles. Father Boyle has put together a team of physicians trained in tattoo removal using laser technology. The team is part of a program that removes the tattoos of ex-gang members and wipes the slate clean. For many, it is as crucial a service as it is merciful. To a former gang

member, the gang tattoo fosters the attitude that the gang's claim on that person's life is permanent. It is a mark of ownership as much as identity. The process of tattoo removal is extremely painful. Patients describe the laser procedure as feeling like hot grease on their skin. Yet the waiting list grows of those who will put up with whatever pain it takes to receive a new identity. So, sisters and brothers, "Arise, your light has come." What does that mean to you? Biblically it means that without Christ, the world is a cold, dark and lonely place. It is a world of conflict and injustice. It is a world of ignorance and fear. But that is not the end of the story. "It gets dark, then it gets very, very dark, then Jesus shows up."

But there's one thing more to be said. If the darkness of this world is going to be pushed back any further, you and I will need to let our little lights shine. Christ is the light of the world, but we who are followers of Christ are called to reflect in our lives that we have been in his presence. We do that by continuing to shine the light of his love into our dark world.

Henry Van Dyke wrote one of the most famous fictional accounts of the coming of the magi to Bethlehem which he called *The Story of the Other Wise Man*. In this story Van Dyke speaks of a fourth wise man who searched for years for the Christ child, but was never able to catch up with the others. This

wise man had three jewels, a gift of great wealth which he intended to give to the newborn king. But in his journey to find the newborn king he came across people who had great needs. He could not pass them by without trying to help. He ended up using the three jewels he had intended to offer the Christ child to care for the needs of these persons he found in want.

This fourth magi searched for Jesus for the rest of his life, only to realize at the end of his life that he had both found him and worshipped him each time he gave himself and his gift to one who was in need. Through his compassion this fourth wise man pushed back some of the world's darkness. And that is our task as well. We are to live in the presence of Christ so that with time we will be able to reflect his light through the service we give to others.

My last story, a traveling man bought his wife a little souvenir, a phosphorescent match box which was supposed to glow in the dark. However, when he turned out the light to demonstrate its use, there was not even the faintest glow. Disgustedly, he concluded that he had been cheated. The next day his wife examined the box more closely, and found an inscription in tiny letters, "If you want me to shine in the night, keep me in the sunlight through the day." She did as directed and that night after dinner it was a pleasant surprise for her husband when she turned out the light and the match box

shone with a brilliant glow. Now for our challenge of this week: What was true of that match box is true of us. Any light we shine in this dark world is but reflected light. It is the light of Jesus Christ's great love. When we live in his presence and seek to show his love to our neighbors, then the darkness is pushed back until the day comes when we all live in his love and eternal light, so smile brightly. Smiling will never break your face. Just the opposite. Your facial expression will be the reflected light of Jesus Christ, so just smile and smile and smile and smile and that light will reflect to you. AMEN.