

A LIGHT GREATER THAN YOU THINK

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2019

This is Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany. It means that time when Jesus was revealed clearly to be the Christ of God. And not only was He revealed to the Jews who looked for a Christ, but to all the nations of the world as well. The word “Epiphany” comes from the Greek, and it means to show forth, manifest, make plain. We speak of having “an epiphany” when we have a sudden, stunning revealing of a great truth that changes our perspective. Showing forth and making plain requires a great revealing light . . . something like the star of Bethlehem, huh? And it requires the nations – the Gentiles – something like a Wise Man from a far distant place, huh?, coming to that light. That’s why the scripture passages are filled with nations and kings coming to the brightness of “your rising.” And light, O, a great light to come by.

Arise, Jerusalem, and shine like the sun;
The glory of the Lord is shining
on you.

As Christians, you and I recognize the source and center of that light to be Jesus Christ. Well, surprise! Because our Lord Jesus Christ is the source and center of the light we long for, the Epiphany, the showing forth, is brighter and greater than you think or hope.

Actually, instead of expecting Christ’s light to be dazzling and cosmic in proportion, we often see it as a narrow, flickering beam that illumines a few pieces of our lives from time to time.

That’s the way Joseph and Mary were undoubtedly tempted to look at Jesus at the appearance of the Wise Men. The dramatic events of that first Christmas night were fading into the past. The shepherds, with their astonishing

story of the angels' song in the heavens, had returned to their flocks. The curious Bethlehemites who had heard the startling story from the shepherds had likewise come and gazed and gone. Joseph and Mary and the babe had moved from the straw of the stable-cave to the warmth of a house. Jesus was sleeping and crying and waking up in the middle of the night—just like any ordinary baby. So really, what is so extraordinary about this baby?

J.B. Phillips, author of a very good translation of the New Testament, also wrote a whole book on how we Christians try to narrow down the scope of the Epiphany light of Christ. He called his book, *Your God is Too Small*. In chapter after chapter, Phillips lifts up the images of God that we have fashioned in our great effort to minimize and trivialize the impact of His coming.

And so it happens with us. Christmas and Epiphany may come and go in our lives, and our reaction is a broad yawn that communicates unmistakably the message that Christ's becoming flesh and blood for you and me barely causes a ripple in our mind and spirit. Certainly it doesn't light up our lives, or dramatically change our thought patterns, or radically empower us to reflect on the amazing love of Jesus.

So what's the problem? Does the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ shine less brightly in our day? Of course not! Our expectations are too low. The Epiphany light is brighter and greater than you think.

That light of Christ really CAN make a powerful impact on our beings and in our lives. The possibility of the birth of the Messiah moved Wise Men to reflect deeply, to act boldly—setting out on a long and costly journey, and ultimately to kneel down and worship this baby King with gifts of gold and frankincense, and myrrh . . . and with the gifts of their own lives. The Epiphany impacted them.

The light of Epiphany IS greater than you think. The Eternal God became a crying, kicking baby, then experienced our human joys and struggles, our progresses and frustrations, and death itself, so that the light of God's love might

shine through the years and over strange terrain and into you and me this very day.

And the light of Epiphany—the showing forth in all its fullness—is even greater *still* than you or I might think. The showing forth of Jesus, the Christ, keeps you and me growing, and changing, and seeing something new, and experiencing a fuller life.

The Wise Men from the East were astrologers, but they were no shallow stargazers. They had a deep theology. Think about what they chose to bring to this new king who had arisen on earth over in Judea. *Gold* told of their belief that Jesus was King. There is no more fitting gift for a king than gold. *Frankincense* was the incense of the censers of the Priest in the Temple. This King was a Priest as no other would ever be. And what is a Priest, but one who makes a bridge between me and my God? And the *myrrh*. Think of giving a baby a flask of myrrh. You've probably been told it was perfume. But myrrh was the perfume used to anoint the bodies of the dead. Myrrh was a mute but moving and mysterious testimony to their recognition that this baby came into the world to die . . . on purpose.

If the Wise Men had stayed and lived there to follow Jesus from village to village as He made people whole, if they had stayed and followed Him to the Cross and to the tomb that couldn't stay closed, then they would have discovered that that light of Epiphany they followed was far, far, brighter than they ever imagined.

Bright enough to show the purpose of life to be touching lepers and eating with sinners and washing dirty, tired feet, and struggling all night in prayer. Bright enough to show that pain and suffering can be redemptive. Bright enough to illumine horizons in the world to come, to affirm with a certainty life after death. Bright enough to keep faith growing from month to month, and maturing year to year.

And the Epiphany light, like a many-fired diamond, is *still greater* than you think. From the very beginning, the church has recognized that the Wise Men were Gentiles. Later tradition even describes one as an African. Regardless of whether they were Iranian, or Iraqi, or Ethiopian, or Greek, there is no doubt that Mary and Joseph were wonder-struck and mystified by the brilliance of the light of Christ that drew even Gentiles to His door seeking their King.

That kind of brilliant, searching light compels us and, yes, empowers us, towards a truly inclusive Church which encircles all people. Surely it was this Epiphany that inspired Martin Luther King, Jr., when he had a dream that “black man and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we’re free at last!”

Such a brilliant Epiphany compels us and empowers us to global thinking and global concerns for justice and peace. Because of this boundary-shattering appearance, you and I can no longer say that fighting between Israel and Palestine is “their” business. We can no longer say that poverty and hunger in Central America, or India, or in the sub-Sahara is somebody else’s responsibility. We can no longer say that tensions that might, indeed, explode into a war is simply the concern of politicians. It is ours. Christ’s light melts down the boundaries and draws us all together in Him.

The light that is Epiphany—the revealing, the showing forth clearly and unmistakably—is brighter and greater than you think. Enough to renew your whole inner being. Bright enough to cause your spirit and your life force to grow and grow and grow. Bright enough to impel you to a global consciousness that shatters walls . . . and builds bridges.

May He be revealed to us, today, and may the light which has never been overcome by the darkness, excite, and warm, and awe us. But most of all, may it empower you and me because that light that is revealed to us today, the light that is revealed to the world—our Epiphany—is Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

