

Drawn to Your Light

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
January 12, 2020—Observing the Epiphany

- Isaiah 59:9b-16; Isaiah 59:20-60:6 (Good News Translation) We hope for light to walk by, but there is only darkness,¹⁰ and we grope about like blind people. We stumble at noon, as if it were night, as if we were in the dark world of the dead.¹¹ We are frightened and distressed. We long for God to save us from oppression and wrong, but nothing happens.
¹²“LORD, our crimes against you are many. Our sins accuse us. We are well aware of them all.¹³ We have rebelled against you, rejected you, and refused to follow you. We have oppressed others and turned away from you. Our thoughts are false; our words are lies.¹⁴ Justice is driven away, and right cannot come near. Truth stumbles in the public square, and honesty finds no place there.¹⁵ There is so little honesty that those who stop doing evil find themselves the victims of crime.” The LORD has seen this, and he is displeased that there is no justice.¹⁶ He is astonished to see that there is no one to help the oppressed. So he will use his own power to rescue them and to win the victory....
²⁰ The LORD says to his people, “I will come to Jerusalem to defend you and to save all of you that turn from your sins.²¹ And I make a covenant with you: I have given you my power and my teachings to be yours forever, and from now on you are to obey me and teach your children and your descendants to obey me for all time to come.”
^{60:1} Arise, Jerusalem, and shine like the sun; the glory of the LORD is shining on you!² Other nations will be covered by darkness, but on you the light of the LORD will shine; the brightness of his presence will be with you.³ Nations will be drawn to your light, and kings to the dawning of your new day.
⁴ Look around you and see what is happening: your people are gathering to come home! Your sons will come from far away; your daughters will be carried like children.⁵ You will see this and be filled with joy; you will tremble with excitement. The wealth of the nations will be brought to you; from across the sea their riches will come.⁶ Great caravans of camels will come, from Midian and Ephah. They will come from Sheba, bringing gold and incense. People will tell the good news of what the LORD has done!
- Matthew 5:14-16 (Good News Translation)¹⁴ “You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.¹⁵ No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house.¹⁶ In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: We can do small things with great love when we welcome the light of Christ to guide us.

An actor-friend of mine recently reflected on the Christmas season drawing to a close. Ironically, I met Jeff years ago when we were doing a Christmas-themed show: “Miracle on 34th Street—the Musical.” Last week he wrote

I realize as I’ve grown older that it gets a little harder every year to “put away” Christmas. Not literally, though that’s hard too, but spiritually and emotionally. It strikes me odd since the years fly by so fast now. It will be the holidays again in a wink. But I think when you reach a certain age, you want to freeze those moments and memories because you realize just how precious they are. You know that someone you just saw won’t be here next Christmas. They become part of the wind and we remember them with a toast or a kind word. I’ve always thought our ghosts visit us at Christmas. I’m going to learn to rejoice in them.¹

¹ Facebook post by Jeffrey Glover, January 7, 2020, used with his permission.

That's how Jeff was feeling as Christmas drew to a close. How about you? On the one hand we may be glad to have put behind us the pressures and expectations that Christmas observances bring upon us. But on the other hand, we may feel wistful as we put away the wrapping paper and take down the decorations.

That implausibly delightful story with its manger-crib and shepherds and angels unfolded for us as the church observed four weeks of preparation during Advent leading to the Twelve Days celebrating the Nativity. Now the decorations have been put away for the next eleven months and the story has been tucked away... almost.

You see, to the story of God's Incarnation—God's action of coming among us in the flesh of humankind—the Bible adds one more component. A spectacular new star—some marvelous, inexplicable celestial body—caught the attention of astrologers residing in a land far away from Israel. As ancient peoples were inclined to do, these astrologers interpreted the star's unexpected appearance as a divine announcement of a truly momentous birth. Feeling compelled to investigate, these mystics—these Magi—set out on a months-long journey, following their guide-star in a direction that led them toward the capital city of Jerusalem.

In an audience with King Herod the Magi learned that Jewish prophecy anticipated a savior would be born in nearby Bethlehem. The travelers went there and located the boy and his mother in their home (Joseph, Mary and Jesus had been able to settle in during the intervening months). They honored the child with gifts fit for royalty: costly myrrh, fragrant frankincense, precious gold.

Even without reading it from the Bible we know that familiar story... although we may "remember" more than is actually in Matthew's gospel. For instance,

- Though the travelers are commonly referred to as "the three kings," and though they were given names Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar hundreds of years later,² Matthew's gospel says only says that there were three gifts, not that there were three givers.
- Nor does Matthew say that they were kings, though they may have worked for a king. After all, what country would have more than one king anyway?
- What's more, Matthew never says they traveled by camel. Look in the Bible. You won't find it.

But that's what we picture in our mind. Why? Some of those traditions may have their origin in the Old Testament prophecy we heard from Isaiah Chapter 60 in statements like

...Arise, shine; for your light has come...

...Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn....

...A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come.

The Christian tradition commemorates this final episode in the Christmas story as the "Epiphany." Like so many church terms, that's from a Greek word. Epiphany means "manifestation" or "appearance." The idea is that the Savior of the World was born among the Jewish people, but the visitation of the Magi or "Wise Men" or "kings" helped the world see that ministry and salvation offered by Jesus was not just for the Jewish people but for all people.

Stars and light and the colors of white and gold are common themes in Epiphany. Light is a common symbol for discovery or revealing something. When we want more people to know about something we might say we need to "shed some light on it." A glimmer of hope in a difficult circumstance is often thought of as "a light at the end of the tunnel."

Jesus himself said, "I am the light of the world." Through his life and ministry Jesus revealed God's gracious mercy and unconditional love to the world. Jesus embodied the words of Old Testament prophecy "Arise, shine, for your light has come." The events remembered in the observance of Epiphany help us realize that Jesus grew beyond his infancy and childhood days of promise and dreams. Jesus grew

² In about the 8th century the names of three Magi—Bithisarea, Melichior, and Gathaspa—appear in a chronicle known as the *Excerpta latina barbari*. They have become known most commonly as Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar (or Casper). According to Western church tradition, Balthasar is often represented as a king of Arabia or sometimes Ethiopia, Melchior as a king of Persia, and Gaspar as a king of India. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Magi>, accessed 1/10/2020.

to live in the work-a-day world where we all live. He experienced life as we know it – filled with stresses and joys and tragedies and successes and challenges and fears and hopes.

Yes, Jesus is “the light of the world,” showing a way forward built on placing faith in God and trust in one another. But Jesus also said to the people who came to him, “You are the light of the world.” *You? Me?* Every one of us is probably thinking, “There’s a big difference between Jesus and me!” How are we to be beacons drawing people to God? What do we say? What about our own imperfections? How can we be “the light of the world” bringing peace to a world in turmoil, healing to a wounded spirit, hope to one who feel besieged from all sides? It’s overwhelming imagining that we are called to have the kind of impact Jesus did.

On Thursday I was at a meeting with the new pastor at Rockport United Methodist Church. Lorrin shared a passage from a book she was reading that spoke to me about the overwhelming, intimidating prospect that we are to be light for the world like Jesus is. The author acknowledged that yes, it’s important to stand up for justice, to speak or author words that are moving and powerful, or to bring about major, needed changes in our communities or our world. But the author went on to say that “...more often what God asks [us] to do is to persist in doing small things with great love.” Examples she gave included

Sometimes my call is to help my daughter treat a classmate with kindness. Sometimes it is to sit with someone hurting even though it seems to make no difference. Sometimes it is to initiate a hard but important conversation. Sometimes it is to offer quiet grace to someone undeserving....

Our faithfulness in small things lays the groundwork for any big things that God might be preparing.... Our humility in small things points to the path taught by Jesus, whose grace is sufficient for us, who helps us in our weakness, and who is the source of the great love that the world needs more than anything else.³

Arise, Presbyterians in Rocky River, and shine, for your light has come; the glorious grace of God’s love shines upon you, and others will be drawn to your light!

- As you welcome the guiding light of God in Jesus Christ, even the many simple, seemingly insignificant things you say and do can bring the light of God’s love into the lives you touch: a classmate, perhaps, or that person you always see on the bus.
- You can be the light of the world for the bored store clerk just waiting for her shift to end as she scans an endless conveyor belt of products from an endless line of customers.
- Your light can illumine the way of grace for the harried airline ticket agent helping yet another inexperienced traveler in front of you.
- You can be the light of the world giving a desperately needed, gentle glimmer of hope to the anxious parent sitting in the pediatrician’s waiting room yet again.
- Your light of kindness could show the way for the tough-acting teen who hasn’t seen other options for how to face the world.

Our approach to Christmas began with the prophetic call to arise and shine because our guiding light was coming. As we leave this Christmas season the final word of Christmas again is about “light.” God elected to come into our world in Jesus, who is a life-giving light of the world. God fills us with the light of Christ’s love and urges us to “let our light shine.” As you welcome the love of Jesus to fill you and move you, others will be “drawn to your light.” Through the “small things you do with great love” may they come to know that God is an awesome God, full of forgiveness, mercy, and love.

[sermons: se20200112; © 2020 Jon M. Fancher]

³ Emily Peck-McClain, Danyelle Trexler, Shannon Sullivan, J. Paige Boyer, Jen Tyler, We Pray with Her: Encouragement for All Women Who Lead. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018, page unknown.