

Lighting the Path Home

A sermon¹ by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
January 3, 2021—Epiphany Sunday

- Psalm 27 (selected verses) New Revised Standard Version
¹The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?...
⁴One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple....
¹³I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.
¹⁴Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!
- Matthew 2:1-12 New Revised Standard Version ¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:
⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"
⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This Wednesday will be the "Twelfth Day of Christmas." The Christian Church has a special name for that day. We call it "Epiphany." Epiphany is related to Christmas, not just by their proximity on the calendar but also by the origin of the celebration. In fact, it may surprise you to know that the Christian Church's celebration of Epiphany is actually older than the celebration of Christmas. To understand how this happened, think of the early Christians as being divided into Western Christians (based in Rome) and Eastern Christians (based in Constantinople, which is now called Istanbul).

¹ I originally preached this sermon on January 2, 2000 under the title "Watch Where That Light's Pointed."

You see, from very early in the Christian Era – shortly after the earthly life of Jesus – the Eastern Christians had a holy day to celebrate the fact that God became visible to the world – God became *manifest*—in the person of Jesus Christ. That’s where we get the word “epiphany” – it comes from a Greek word that means “*manifestation*.” It wasn’t until the fourth century that Western Christians in the region of Rome began a separate celebration to acknowledge that not only did God become visible but also that God became visible by taking on human flesh – God became incarnate – in the person of Jesus. By the year 336 the Western Christians instituted a holy day to celebrate the “incarnation,” the earthly birth of Jesus, a holy day called Christmas.

So Christmas and Epiphany *are* related. In reality, though, most of us give all the attention to Christmas and virtually ignore Epiphany. We say, “Christmas is when Jesus was born, but Epiphany is just when the Wise Men visited him.” It’s common to say that. It’s also wrong – or at least it’s a gross simplification. It’s not wrong to use Epiphany to remember the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child. But the significance of Epiphany is broader than that one picturesque event. Epiphany means more than simply that three visitors from the east got a private audience with a toddler destined to become world-famous.

The significance of Epiphany is simple. At the same time, it has the power to actually change your life. I can explain it best by telling you a story about defensive driving.

Gary and I have been friends since right after college. We met when we lived in the same apartment building in Flint, Michigan, found that we both were engaged to be married in less than a year, discovered that we were both salesmen in the grocery industry. Since our respective marriages, Gary and Nancy and Mary and I have remained good friends.

Gary is still a salesman. He drives thousands of miles each year on sales calls. Many years ago when we were in Michigan visiting with Gary and Nancy, he told me that his company sent him to a defensive driving school. It wasn’t punishment, he pointed out – it was a preventative measure. As I questioned Gary about the course, he told me that the instructor had a “Defensive Driving Tip Number One,” a recommendation for anyone to reduce their risk for being in an accident. Gary said that this “Number One Tip” was something that doesn’t require special skill or

training, doesn't require additional equipment, and costs almost nothing. "Well, what is it!?" I asked. And he said, "Drive with your headlights on."

"That's it?"

"Yup. Day or night, whenever you're driving, you turn on your headlights. Some cars do it automatically, but if yours doesn't, just flip 'em on."

"Even in the daytime?" I asked.

"Especially in the daytime," he answered. "You see, the reason driving with your headlights on reduces your risk for an accident is not because of what your lights enable you to see, but the fact that your headlights enable others to see you. Your headlights make you visible to other drivers."

Now, what does Defensive Driving Tip Number One have to do with Epiphany? Just this: Epiphany celebrates that Jesus is the Light of the world. As the Light of the World, Jesus doesn't shine on us, illuminating this world so that God can see us better. God doesn't need help to see us. But we need help to see God. Jesus is our help. He is the Light for all the world, the Light shining on God. Jesus illumines God so we can see God, so we can know God, and give our lives to God.

God's gift is not a Christmas magic act of "Hey, look at me! I can take on human flesh!" God's gift is an epiphany, a revelation, a discovery. In the life of Jesus God illumines a path and extends an invitation to come home to God, to surrender to God's majesty and greatness, to accept God's compassion and care.

Accept God's invitation. Follow the path illuminated by the light of Jesus Christ that leads to the heart of God.

Pray with me, won't you: *God, for each of us there are times when we realize that we are in the dark because we try to live apart from you. Hear the prayers of many hearts in this moment, that we will find the courage to embrace your love in Jesus Christ, for then we will delight in the grace of your mercy. We pray calling on the name and power of Jesus Christ. Amen.*