

1.7.2024 Epiphany Sunday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

“Nations shall come to your light”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christmas is about light. From Christmas Eve until Epiphany, Christmas is a season of light. The true light that enlivens every person is continually coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the light of the world.

At Epiphany we remember that the Magi were led by Christ’s light in the light of a star. The light of this star led them from the east, from ancient Persia to Jerusalem. Their journey must have taken months, and very likely much longer, perhaps even years. This light was so compelling that the Magi left their nations traveling over dangerous roads carrying the wealth of gold, incense, and myrrh. This light must have overcome fear and doubt, for they traveled a great distance with only the promise of hope.

As T.S. Eliot’s poem, “*Journey of the Magi*” (1927) suggests, the Magi traveled “With the voices singing in our ears saying That this was all folly.” Traveling such a great distance with only hope, the Magi traveled as we do, following the light of Christ which overcomes fear and doubt with the confidence of grace and faith. If they had turned back, if they had not made the journey of faith, they would not have believed in the birth of a child whose Epiphany they saw with their own eyes.

The narrator of the poem, presumably one of the Magi, now much later in life, looks back upon that first Epiphany saying,

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

With the coming of the light, the Magi had seen the birth of a child and with him, the beginning of the death of old ways. With this birth, they had witnessed an old world beginning to end. This birth and the child they saw required them to change, to die to themselves. Having seen the Son born of Mary in Bethlehem, how could they feel at ease in the old ways, in old understandings of the world? Meeting Jesus the Christ-Child changed them. The aging Magi's words, "I should be glad of another death," suggest he understood that only in dying would he fully know life in Christ's light. Looking back upon your own life, how do you see your life changed as you have encountered and been encountered by Jesus?

The name of today's celebration, "Epiphany," comes from the Greek word meaning "manifestation" or "appearance." Most of us understand Epiphany as the celebration of Jesus Christ's manifestation to the Magi, and through them to the nations of the world. Epiphany traditionally brings the Christmas season to a close, and so today we celebrate our Savior's ongoing Epiphany and work among the nations of the world.

The bitter agony of the Magi's voice in the poem should remind us that the world is still in need of the light of Christ. The world continues in old ways of doing things: violence, killing, oppressing the weak and the poor are just as real today as they were in antiquity for the Magi. The words of today's Psalm 72 should make us feel ill at ease in the world. The Psalmist writes, "*For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy and saves [them] from oppression and violence, he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.*"

The weariness of the Magi's voice in the poem might also be our weariness with a world that continues to clutch at the gods of power, wealth, and injustice. On Epiphany, we do well to ask ourselves, what must I give up of this world to follow Christ? How might I use my life to share Christ's light? How might I pay homage to Christ with my wealth, my power, and my life?

The prophet Isaiah writes, "*Nations shall come to your light.*" Isaiah's words leap off the page because these words have not yet been fulfilled. The nations continue to be at war with one another. Every day the world continues to walk with darkness and death. Who will redeem the weak, poor, and needy from the oppression and violence of the strong, the mighty, and the oppressor?

The prophet Isaiah writes, "*The wealth of the nations shall come to you.*" Isaiah's words leap off the page because these words have not yet been fulfilled. The nations of the world continue to

use their wealth for weapons, for selfish commercial gain, for almost everything except God's work toward the needy and the poor. We give to the poor what is left over; we give to those in need only after our own needs and wants have been satisfied. Today's word of God is hard because Epiphany marks the beginning of the real work of Christmas: Sharing the light of Christ in the darkness of this world each day.

The Apostle Paul certainly struggled with this theme in today's reading from Ephesians. Paul calls himself the very least of all the saints, someone who relies only upon the grace and riches of Christ. Though Paul was imprisoned in Rome and would be martyred for his faith, Paul wrote that the grace of faith is what gives us boldness and confidence to live our lives.

On Epiphany, we remember King Herod and all of Jerusalem were frightened at the news of the birth of the king of the Jews. This birth threatened Herod's power and the old ways of doing things. So frightened was Herod that he killed innocent children trying to prevent the future. We again see the nations clutching their gods, trying to prevent the future, oppressing the weak, and seeking maintain their power. We again see fear destroying our world.

Does Epiphany make to you feel anxious? It should, for it means that the light, the star that led the Magi, is born to overcome darkness with light, evil with justice, and war with peace. Christ's light shines upon the reality of our world, allowing us to see the world for what it really is.

"Nations shall come to your light." Christmas is about light and Epiphany is an encounter with the light of the world.

How will you live again this year in Christ's light? How will you pay homage to Christ with your wealth, your power, and your life?

Like the Magi, travel this world by another road, another way – travel in the way of the light. Travel in the way of Christ. Amen.