

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Feast of the Epiphany B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
January 3, 2021
The Rev. Karen Haig

How The Light Gets In

Happy New Year and Epiphany blessings on you all! Our church new year actually began on the first Sunday of Advent as we began to watch and wait for the coming Christ child. And while we're still in the season of Christmas, today we're celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany – which actually falls on January 6th.

In the early church, Epiphany was one of the three primary feasts, along with Easter and Pentecost – yep, that's right, Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost... not Christmas. Epiphany in the early church, was focused on the revelation of Jesus as God's Son, the beloved. We will get to that next week when we celebrate Jesus' baptism. But today we celebrate Epiphany as the day the three wise men were thought to finally reach the Christ-child. We celebrate the season of Epiphany as a season of revelation, the season that reveals the Christ light coming into the world. *Arise, shine, for your light has come...*

Those were heady words for Isaiah's listeners. Those listeners were people who had just returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, where they had been exiled for over 50 years. The city was in ruins, the people were in conflict and there was great discord around rebuilding the temple. The people were utterly demoralized, surrounded by darkness and gloom. The prophet had for some time, been calling out their wicked ways, their many transgressions, their multitudinous sins. *Isaiah 59:12* And suddenly they hear "Arise, shine, for your light has come!" The prophet, no longer preaching gloom and despair, has finally proclaimed that their light had come, and God's glory was all around them.

We know something of the darkness Isaiah's listeners knew, we've experienced our own very real doom and gloom these past months. It seems we've waited forever for the light to come, and though things aren't all that much different than they were on December 31st, it feels good to join with the whole wide world and welcome in a new year, a blank slate, a time of hope and promise and yes, maybe even the light at the end of the tunnel. 2020 was a hard year for everyone, even if we weren't explicitly impacted by the virus, or the political climate, or the racism that rocked our country. We're emotionally exhausted from those things even if we weren't personally touched by them, and it feels good to look ahead in the hope of a better, brighter, lighter future. Some of us are starting to feel as though the light is returning – it's happening almost imperceptibly as the days slowly lengthen. It's happening in our country and in the world, as health care workers and nursing home residents receive vaccinations. It's happening in our public discourse with leaders who promise to set aside division and acrimony. God is redeeming our time in the darkness. This Epiphany feels particularly poignant – the

revelation of Jesus Christ as the true light of the world is something we need to hold foremost in mind and heart. *Arise, shine, for your light has come...*

God promises redemption... AND we must take our part in that redeeming. We must rise. We must arise, must rise to the reconciling work God has set before us. That's why the light has come you know. It's not just to make us feel better, though surely it does that. The light has come into the world to give us what we need to rise and shine and do the work God sets before us.

But wait, we cry! We're exhausted and it would be really great just to bask in the possibility of the light at the end of the tunnel. And we can. We just need to remember that the light that dispels all darkness comes, so that we can reflect that light for the life of the world. God's glory, God's presence has come, not just to God's people Israel, but to all nations. This is the light that brings new life and salvation for all people, even people like those sorcerers from the East.

That's what they were, you know. We call them kings because in our creches and the paintings they're almost always wearing crowns. We say they were kings who came to worship the newborn king. But they were much more likely sorcerers, occult practitioners, astrologist star-gazers. They weren't Jews, searching for the long-awaited Messiah. They were foreigners, unbelievers, but even they couldn't resist the pull of the great love that had been born in Bethlehem. They got as far as Jerusalem, before the star stalled and they couldn't tell where to go. But as long as they were looking for a newborn king, they decided to consult the old king. Surely he would know where the new king was.

King Herod seemed surprised when the three strangers from far off foreign lands came asking about directions to the palace of the new king. The three strangers had seen the new king's star, a star like no one had ever seen before. True, these three foreigners were star gazers, so they would certainly have been paying attention, but everybody knew stars were symbols of kings and that every new king was heralded by his own special star. And because this was a star unlike any other, it was surprising that Herod hadn't noticed. But he hadn't. So in order to keep up appearances, he had to be the smartest and most important person around. So he called all of HIS wise people together and asked them where this new king could be found. "In Bethlehem," they told him – that's what the prophet had said.

Pretending to want to worship the newborn king himself, Herod sent the three foreigners along their way to do his reconnaissance work, telling them to come back with news of where the new king could be found. It was all a lie, of course. Herod was terrified of losing his power. Herod the Great, father of the man who would have Jesus crucified some thirty years later, made a plan to kill this rival king. Herod hadn't been waiting for the Messiah and hadn't any idea of the Kingdom of God Jesus came to bring. Herod just knew there was a rival king and so he did what powerful people do when their power is threatened. He made a plan to kill the threat by killing the child, and to do that just as soon as the three foreigners came back with the child's location.

But things didn't go Herod's way. The wise ones were warned in a dream to go home by another way, and so they did. And when Herod realized that he'd been duped, he became so enraged that he commanded the massacre of every baby boy in the region.

This "after the manger scene" isn't the part of the Christmas story we like to tell. And still, it is a story that speaks to us in our own times. This very day, there are families who have, like Joseph and Mary, left their own countries, afraid for their lives. This very day, there are innocent children dying from starvation or disease or violence. This very day we see leaders who are terrified of losing their power, grasping for anything, regardless of the consequences to the people they are to serve, that will keep them in power. This very day, we see well-intentioned people manipulated by ill-intentioned people, just as Herod manipulated those three foreigners who audaciously came to him looking for a new king.

While we may be tempted to compare Herod the Great to individual politicians or leaders in our own time, that would make a poverty of this story. Yes, this is a story of powerful people going to any lengths to maintain their power, but it is so much more. This is a story of the power of an utterly vulnerable infant, born in a cave surrounded by farm animals, in a land not his own. A little baby boy who held the promise of light and salvation and justice and mercy and grace, who came to bring love and grace and justice and salvation for everyone. Even Herod.

For people who put all their hope in accomplishment and influence and wealth and command, the thought of needing God's grace or mercy is absolutely ridiculous. But it doesn't matter. What Herod was doing then and what the people we think are the bad guys are doing now, has no impact on the truth that the light has come into the world to dispel the darkness. Jesus comes. He came two thousand years ago in Bethlehem and he comes to us today just the same. And that is good news for people who could use some light. Jesus comes, offering mercy and tenderness and blessing and love to any one of us who opens her hands and her heart to receive them.

Where do you get glimpses of that light? They are there, everywhere really, if we have eyes and hearts to see them. It will help to be gentle and tender and self-compassionate and kind. We've all been working so hard, trying so hard and it is time to turn our faces toward the light and bask in the glory of the God who forgives all of our failings and wants us to do the same. It's time to remember the vulnerability of the baby laid in a manger and the grown man who hung on the cross, and to shine a light on our tenderness and vulnerability too. We're not promised an easy life. We are promised a life of God with us. So hold tight to each other and to our God, and know the light is coming, the light is always coming. We simply need to let the light in.

Songwriter Leonard Cohen says it best –

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in¹

¹ Anthem. Leonard Cohen, 1984. From the album Various Positions. Label Columbia, Passport, producer John Lissauer.

All the things we think we can't do, all the things we think we can't get right, all the things we miss and hope for and pray for, all our heart's desires are the places we crack open, the places the light gets in. So be gentle and kind with yourselves and the ones you meet along the way, and know that the light of the world is with you and in you and shining brilliantly through you. No need to be perfect, no need to get it all right. God is here, lighting up the whole wide world.
Amen