



Epiphany

January 6, 2019

Church of the Advent

Darkness and Light

Greetings and blessings on this most holy Feast of the Epiphany, a Church feast day that can easily get short-changed so soon after the spectacular celebrations of Christmas. Always on January 6, Epiphany is usually lost in celebrations of the 12th Day of Christmas--and 12th Night, the night of January 5, the night before. The 12 Days of Christmas as *a thing* comes from a Western European folk song as old as the 1500's about gift giving; it has no religious significance, though there is an old debunked tradition from the Roman Catholicism which gives a hidden holy meaning to each gift of the day--such as the four calling birds being the writers of the gospels, the three French hens representing faith, hope and love, and eleven pipers standing for the faithful remaining eleven apostles. If you get my drift, an imaginative stretch.

The Feast of the Epiphany itself has never rated a school or work holiday and some years makes barely a blip on our spiritual radar, though every once in a while it falls on a Sunday, inviting us to spend some time with its images and themes. After all, our liturgical calendar offers us a Season of Epiphany, stretching between Christmas and Lent, when we spend time hearing about the young Jesus--the few stories about his infancy and childhood, and the gospel descriptions of his early ministry, including his baptism in the Jordan River, his temptation by Satan in the desert, his first miracle at the Wedding at Cana, and his calling of the disciples.

What does Epiphany even mean? *Epiphany* is defined as *manifestation*, or *striking appearance*. As a literary term, an *epiphany* is the experience of a character in a story suddenly seeing something in a whole new way, and being changed by the insight that comes with that revelation. From the Bible, we have the stories of Jonah, who had his epiphany in the belly of a whale, or Moses, whose epiphany came in front of a burning bush. From more contemporary stories, it might be the moment in *A Christmas Story* when Ralphie almost did shoot his eye out with his new BB gun, or

when the Grinch realized that the joy he had been missing in his life was not about stuff, but rather about the love found in the community of Whoville. For an epiphany to be remarkable and life-changing it needs to be extraordinary, unusual, and to stand out from what might otherwise be expected. For an event to grab our attention, we need to be startled a bit, impressed, excited, or inspired. We might think life is full of these opportunities, but the capacity we have to accommodate the new into the everyday, before quickly throwing it onto the pile of the old, jades us to potential epiphanies probably every day. This short spiritual season is offered to us for a reason, perhaps to help us recover from the excesses of Christmastide, perhaps to help us to prepare our hearts for some new revelation that could be life-changing, if we are willing and able to see it.

The foremost Epiphany image is one of *light*. Nowadays we have light at our fingertips whenever we want it. Through the days and days of gloomy wet weather of the past few months, I have often thought that lamplight is the only thing holding back an regional epidemic of seasonal affective disorder. We have security lights and flashlights and stadium lights and street lights and LED headlights that blind oncoming drivers on Bear Grass Road in the dark, but hopefully help us see the deer in the ditches. We cheer ourselves up and ward off the melancholy with candlelight--scented and unscented--and light fires in the fireplace--wood or gas or just faked on video screens--to make us feel warmer, but mostly to offer some cheerful light. We have actually made so much light for ourselves in our time that we can see the glow of a city in the distant sky long before we arrive at its outskirts, and it is almost impossible to see the stars unless we go way out into the wilderness, turning everything off, and seeking real darkness.

The Epiphany of the Lord is known for its spectacular light--that guiding light in the darkness, a shining star over Bethlehem seen in the Eastern sky. That light was a beacon for all kinds of people--rich kings from far away and poor shepherds from over the next hill--leading them towards an improbable destination, prompting them to bring unusual gifts for a new baby they didn't even know. The Feast of the Epiphany celebrates that spectacular and special light--the Light of Christ, the Light of the World--

light that guides, reveals, and illuminates, allowing the characters in the Epiphany story to see the world in a whole new way, and to be changed by their experience.

Yet the light of Epiphany would not be such a source of revelation without the contrasting darkness. Celebrated in the darkest time of the year when the days are shortest, we retell the story of the dark impulses of the powerful King Herod, who so feared reports of a newborn king of the Jews as a potential rival, that he tried to get the traveling Wise Men from the East to betray where they found the child, so he could have him destroyed. The best of intentions of these foreigners who traveled so far on faith and a gut feeling became shadowed by the anxiety of one who already had everything he needed in the world, but was so afraid of losing it all that he was willing to kill a baby. But the Wise Men experienced their own epiphany, and went home by another way. Sadly, Herod then became enraged, and sent his soldiers out to kill every male infant in his kingdom, spreading the darkest kind of grief to his people. The Light of Christ was born in darkness.

Under the threat of Herod's violence, Joseph had been warned by an angel of the Lord in a dream, and took his new family--probably in the cover of darkness--on the road to Egypt, where they lived as refugees until Herod's death. This experience must have offered a different kind of epiphany to new young parents who suddenly became aware that their new child was both gift and responsibility beyond their imagining, and that what would be required of them to care for him and keep him safe would mean leaving life as they had known it, seeking shelter in a strange place with a new language, without the comfort and support of family or friends, without gainful employment or a place they could call home. Sometimes an *epiphany* is not all good news. Sometimes the full impact on our lives of a decision or choice is not made manifest right away--taking a new job, making a move, starting a business, joining the military, having a child, and any number of other things that fill a life with both joy and hardship, light and darkness. Sometimes the epiphany is a grasping of the cost of a thing that undergirds the excitement and promise of it. The epiphany moment is the one when reality is stripped bare of pretension and the truth is standing naked in front of us. This

is not to be met with fear and dread, for only when we accept the darkness as part of the full measure of a thing can we begin to see and appreciate the light of it.

It helps to remember that even the spectacular Epiphany light was only powerfully manifest with deep darkness behind it. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming of the Messiah by setting the stage in darkness, describing our lives without God's light in them:

For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isaiah's beautiful ancient poetry speaks not only of our human longing for the light of God, but of the assurance of its promise, the expectation that it always coming, and the certainty that it is not only glorious, but accessible to everyone--even though it might seem sometimes that the whole world--or our whole life--is shrouded in darkness. Isaiah's message, and the message of the gospels that followed, is that the Light of Christ come into the world--and into *us* by the mystery of the Incarnation--is strong, sure, and everlasting. It bathes us in protection, and guides us where we are called to go, whether that is to the stable or all the way to Egypt, or into some new and challenging chapter in our lives.

This afternoon at 5pm, here at the church, our children and youth under the direction of Brandon, our Music Director, are offering a special Epiphany celebration service called a *Feast of Lights*, when we will be reminded that though the Light of Christ may have begun its manifestation over the stable in Bethlehem, it did not go out with the departure of the wise men, the shepherds or the Holy Family from that place. Our epiphany moment is to see that this Light is everlasting, and bright enough to carry each and all of us through any darkness. So if you can, come this evening and light a candle as we celebrate the blessings of the Feast of the Epiphany. Amen