Dr. Hugh Hamilton

Trinity Presbyterian Church – Pensacola, FL

January 6, 2019 The Epiphany of the Lord, Cycle C

**Outsiders Becoming Insiders**

Matthew 2:1-12 (13-18)

To tell you the truth, I like Luke’s account of the nativity better than Matthew’s account. Luke’s account is full of good news, feel-good, sweet stories of shepherds and angels and stars. In contrast, Matthew’s account is full of challenge and terror. Exit stage left the stable, enter stage right King Herod’s palace; exit the shepherds and angels, enter the Magi and King Herod; exit Mary and enter Rachel. The sweet Christmas carols are replaced by the screams of Rachel and other mothers of murdered children. If Luke’s version is rated PG, Matthews version is rated R for violence.

The magi’s visit to the Christ Child is called the Epiphany – the “manifestation,” the revealing, as God’s divine glory and plan for salvation are revealed to all the world in Jesus. The world finally gets to find out what God is like. Light is the symbol for this season. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

**The magi, foreigners, Arab Gentiles, searchers of the stars, are outsiders to the Jewish people, but now they are insiders;** they know what has been revealed in Jesus and that the light of the world has come for all people! In showing up to adore the Christ child, these Gentiles shatter religious tradition; the Messiah has come for all people, not just for the Jews. God’s light will be revealed beyond Israel to the whole world! The rest of Luke and Matthew’s story is how Jesus goes on to shatter boundaries of race, religion, class, and gender! Cultural and religious outsiders are brought into belonging and participating in God’s kingdom on earth.

**Jesus’ birth shares the news that all people are equally under the light of Christ**. Epiphany points to witnessing against racism and exclusion of any sort; points to people finding hope through justice, belonging, and hospitality. Much of the pain and suffering in our lives and in our world comes from us imagining that we ourselves are the light. We are not the light. As St. Francis put it, “We are the moon reflecting the rays of the sun from our surface.” Our job is to share the light we have received from Christ with those who still sit in darkness.

**Jesus’s birth also brought the light of God’s unconditional love;** **all people are equal in God’s eyes.** You and I have grace and purpose and meaning and freedom to become the best we can be because of God’s light for all people.

**The light that Jesus bears is not light that is born from a star, but from a life,** God in the flesh, in the person Jesus. Not just in first-century Palestine, but today, as the light of Christ still *warms you* and *warns you* and *guides you* today. Jesus is present to you even now, to help you. Jesus said, *“I am the resurrection and the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life!”* (John 8:12)

**Are you in a difficult time in your life?**  Are you looking for a change in your circumstances? Are you sick and tired of being sick and tired? Do you need an epiphany in your own life? If so, you are in the right place . . . this is the place, …now is the time, to turn your life over to God and to ask His guidance and His persistence in helping you make a new start.

Light is fittingly a symbol in wintertime, the darkest season of the year. People around you need hope, need help, so Jesus said that we do not light a candle and hide it under a bushel basket. Instead, we put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. Jesus is the light of the world. That is great news as you begin this New Year. Your light has come. Christ is the light and in him is no darkness at all.

**As light is the appropriate symbol for Christ, darkness is the appropriate symbol for a world without Christ.**

**Charlie Brown:** Life is confusing. I wish that life was as easily explained as that comic strip philosopher Charlie Brown, once described it. In a *Peanuts* comic strip Lucy says, “Life is a mystery Charlie Brown. . . Do you know the answer?” Charlie Brown answers, “Be kind. Don’t smoke. Be prompt. Smile a lot. Eat sensibly. Avoid cavities and mark your ballot carefully . . . Avoid too much sun. Send overseas packages early. Love all creatures above and below. Insure your belongings and try to keep the ball low . . .” Before he can get out another platitude, Lucy interrupts: “Hold real still,” she says, “because I am going to punch you in the nose!”

 Can you appreciate her frustration? When we need help, none of us appreciates a know-it-all who spouts platitudes that miss our real needs altogether. We need understanding and encouragement! …We need answers…We need Jesus! I pity those who don’t have God in their lives and must depend on their wits alone to solve their problems and face their issues.

* Maybe this past year has been a little rough for you. Perhaps you need somebody to put his or her hand on your shoulder and encourage you. Lay your burden before the lord during communion.
* Or…maybe your 2018 was great because you finally saw the light and things have gone better for you. Thank God for that! Share your love and thanks with God during communion!

**What would it take to help you get your New Year off to a good start?**  New Year’s resolutions are helpful, but our biggest enemy is within. Something in our hearts causes us to resist the very things that we need to have a satisfying life. Darkness is an appropriate symbol for a world without Christ.

**In contrast, light is the appropriate symbol of a world with Christ.** He is our guide, our strength, our protector, our deliverer!

**Airplane:** James Dobson tells of a man flying his single‑engine airplane toward a small country airport in the early days of aviation. It was late in the day, his calculations for time had been a little off, and before he could get the plane in position to land, dusk fell, and he couldn’t see the runway below. He had no lights on his plane, and there was no one on duty at the dirt‑strip airport. He began circling, but the darkness deepened, and for two long hours he flew the plane around and around, knowing that he would certainly crash when his fuel ran out. But he didn’t know what else to do.

Then a miracle happened. Someone on the ground heard the plane’s engine and realized what was happening. That same person drove his car back and forth on the landing strip several times, to show the pilot where it was located; then he stopped and shone the headlights of his car from the far end of the strip to guide the pilot to a safe landing.

**Phosphorescent water:** When professor Harold DeWolf was a young man, he went swimming at midnight one night with a friend in the Atlantic Ocean at Massachusetts Bay. He said the water was full of phosphorescent light. Every dip of his hand in the water produced something like “a circle of flashing gems and every breaker looked like a cascade of fireworks.” To ride the waves, they went out some distance from the shore. Then turning toward land DeWolf was gripped by a strange fear. The lights from the shore no longer shone. So he looked up to the sky to get his bearings. But the sky was like the water--full of the spectacular confusion of the northern lights. “No star was visible.” Then panic overtook him, for in all that glittering display there was no fixed reality. He could not tell the way to shore. He started back with a helpless terror engulfing him” (Dewolf, 77-79). He learned that, with no fixed star to guide him, it was almost impossible to chart out his course.

**Thank God we have a light to show us the way, we have a star by which to navigate the darkness.** It is the same star that guided the magi long ago. It is the light of Christ, our dependable guide, whose love never fails.

In my dictionary, the first definition for ‘light’ is *“something that makes things visible or affords illumination.”* Without light, we are hopelessly blind to our surroundings, blind to our situations and circumstances, blind even to ourselves. Light makes it possible for us to see clearly things as they really are. (*The Random House College Dictionary Revised Edition,* 1975).

Pastor Scott Coltrain states that “an absence of sunlight causes blindness.” He references animals who live out their lives in a complete absence of light are often blind, even eyeless. Mules kept in mines become blind. Fish inside deep caverns have no eyes. Those who live in dungeons, cellars, prisons, mines, and similar places that are denied sunlight lose their sight. “Before Jesus,” Coltrain writes, “most of the world was spiritually blind.” Christ made it possible for us to have a glimpse of God in His glory (Coltrain).

**BYRD:** Philip Yancey tells the story of Commander Richard Byrd, who spent six months in a metal hut at the South Pole. The sun made no appearance during four of the six months he was there. Talk about darkness! Commander Byrd described that experience in his journal: “I find that I crave light as a thirsting man craves water . . . A funereal gloom hangs in the twilight sky. This is the period between life and death…This is the way the world will look to the last man when it dies.”

Three weeks before the sun was due to shine again, Byrd wrote in his journal: “I tried to imagine what it would be like, but the conception was too vast for me to grasp.” When the sun finally did make its appearance, Byrd found it to be overwhelming. (Byrd, *Reaching for the Invisible God: What Can We Expect to Find?)*.

Should we find ourselves in the presence of Christ, we would find ourselves overwhelmed as well--overwhelmed with his holiness, overwhelmed with the light of his love. Bart Millard and MercyMe put it so well in their song, “I Can Only Imagine,”

 *Surrounded by Your glory . . . What will my heart feel?*

 *Will I dance for you Jesus . . . Or in awe of You be still?*

 *Will I stand in your presence . . . Or to my knees will I fall?*

 *Will I sing hallelujah . . . Will I be able to speak at all? . . . I can only imagine.*

Whatever you imagine it will be like when you see Jesus in that final grand epiphany of the glory of Christ, it will be far beyond anything you have ever experienced before. And you joy will exceed anything here on earth!

Are you tired of living in darkness?

 Then come to the table and share your concerns with the Lord.

Are you happy because you have sensed God guidance and life is good?

 Then come to the table and thank God for his goodness and his guidance.

Open your hearts to him, and take courage: Jesus is with you, to deliver you!

 “Arise, shine, for your light is come.” Amen!

Sources

Byrd. In *Reaching for the Invisible God: What Can We Expect to Find?* Zondervan, 2000. Cited by King Duncan, “In The Light Of His Glory*,” Dynamic Preaching*, January 6, 2019.

Coltrain, Scott. [https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/jesus-the-light-of-the-world-scott- coltrain-sermon-on-jesus-life-71725](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/jesus-the-light-of-the-world-scott-%09coltrain-sermon-on-jesus-life-71725).

Dewolf, Harold. *The Religious Revolt Against Reason.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949, cited in David G. Rogne, *All About The Kingdom: Sermons for Proper 24 through Thanksgiving Based on the Gospel Texts.* CSS Publishing Co., Kindle Edition.

Dobson, James. In Tony Castle, *Quotations...p*193. Cited by Dr. Reford Brooks Nash: [http://www.fpcbarberton.org/Sermons/01‑01‑2006%20‑%20Follow%20The%20Star%20 ‑%20Observance%20of%20Epiphany.pdf](http://www.fpcbarberton.org/Sermons/01012006%20%20Follow%20The%20Star%20%09%20Observance%20of%20Epiphany.pdf).

Kelley, Jessica Miller.  *A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2016. Epiphany Series: Robert S. Dannals, 177ff.

*\01-06-19 Outsider Become Insiders.docx*