

Epiphany of Our Lord Sunday

January 3, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12

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.

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

We, as Christians, are so used to celebrating the birth of Jesus. Every year we gather in joyous worship, singing carols and lighting candles. At home we feast on indulgent food and gather around our Christmas trees opening gifts. As the song suggests, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

However, when the birth announcement of Jesus was brought to King Herod by 3 magi, Matthew tells us that all of Jerusalem became frightened! There was no singing of carols or lighting of candles at this news. All of Jerusalem was on alert, which meant political powers, economic powers, and religious powers were all frightened of what was coming. The world was about to turn.

The birth of Jesus to the rest of the world is a scary thing. It threatens to upheave the status quo. The world wants to live in a way where it can call the shots. It wants to dictate who is powerful and who is weak, who is beautiful and worthy and who is ugly and should be shunned, who should be wealthy and who should be poor. A hierarchy of status has always been something we humans have used in order to categorize others.



Humanity greedily admires the rich and powerful while it also makes sure that there are those who are beneath it so it can feel better about its own status.

But to have Jesus calling the shots takes away the status game that humanity plays. Jesus' whole earthly ministry was centered on uplifting the lowly and despised, as well as challenging the wealthy and powerful, so that the world would come to understand that God loves all, which makes all of humanity equally worthy.

So, like Herod, the rest of the world tries really hard to put Jesus to death in any way they can. The world wants to snuff out any trace of Jesus' light so that it can remain in darkness. After all, the world is broken and often rejects the love of God.

Of course, we Christians have a different point of view from the rest of the world. Like the 3 magi, we are overwhelmed with joy, when we meet Jesus within the world. The light of rising star is the illumination of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that leads us to Jesus so that we have come to experience his saving love and mercy. We welcome the ministry of Jesus as we look for opportunities to continue his ministry in this time and place. In essence, Jesus, the first light, has shined upon us so that we may arise as the new light in the world.

It is now the task of we, the Church, to be Christ's shining light to help draw the rest of the world back to God. Thankfully, this is why Christ's church extends far and wide with congregations in millions of different communities across the world. While we might all differ in theology and how we carry out God's mission, we are all connected by the light of Christ. We are the shining light of hope that continues to burn in the darkness, so that the world might know that God is still active in the world.

This means that our time is here and now. We, through the gift of baptism have discovered the bright star of love. In baptism we offer our very being, our very selves, as the gift presented to Jesus. In return we are gifted with the promise that we have been claimed as God's beloved and are therefore heirs to the eternal kingdom. This gift overwhelms us with so much joy that we are sent out, taking a different road from whence we came, for we are no longer the same person. We are a new person and a new light to shine in the broken world.

And all of this is possible because Jesus has washed away our old self, the old Adam, the very being whose nature it was to live in darkness. For Jesus himself traversed into that very darkness, the eternal darkness of death, and shined his transforming light, which was so bright and powerful that it burst forth from the empty tomb and shrouded the entire world with its light.

Now, we find ourselves living in the new light of Jesus' love, grace, and mercy. With this new light we go out into our dark world in order to show all people, regardless of social status, the love of Christ Jesus, so that their hearts might light up in love. We do this by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, getting the thirsty something to drink, providing shelter for the homeless, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, and advocating for the oppressed. And while we have identified leaders in the church to help equip us for the work of ministry, we understand that it will take all of us to be the bright star that will lead others to Jesus.



Thankfully, Jesus gifts us with the means of grace—baptism, the word, and the table—to remind us that there is nothing in this world that can truly snuff out our light. Each week we gather together as a faith community to check-in with each other, to pray together, and to be enriched together through the word proclaimed, as well as the bread of life and cup of salvation. All of this richly nourishes us so that our midnight oil continues to burn strong for the work of ministry we do the rest of the week in our daily lives.

And even though we must currently deal with the repercussions of the pandemic, the light of the shining star will continue to lead us and guide us to where Jesus is present and active, so that we may shine our lights to cast out the darkness. This is why we celebrate Epiphany this day, at the end of the joy of the Christmas season, for the light of Christ is very much needed to frighten the earthly powers, so that the world may be freed from the darkness.

Amen.



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