

“Shining Out the Darkness”

Matthew 2: 1 – 12

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6

Epiphany Sunday, January 7, 2018

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Did any of you happen to see the brightness in the New Year's Day night sky? As I was getting ready for bed, turning out the lights, I noticed something shining outside and thought we had left the outside Christmas lights on. I glanced out the window and it caught my eye, shining in the winter's night sky...the first full moon of the New Year, shining out the darkness. And not only was it a full moon on January 1 but a Super moon – those rare times when a full moon is the closest to the earth and looks 7% bigger than an average full moon. What a glorious way to begin the new year!

Oh, how I love Epiphany Sunday and the Sundays that follow because they are all about God's glory shining out the darkness! Epiphany means God's love made manifest, as in shown, experienced – God's love shining in the world! And just as Christmas Eve would not be the same if we did not read the story of a babe born in Bethlehem, this Epiphany Sunday, often the first Sunday of the New Year, would not be the same without the entrance of the magi. It's a story about journey and how God's light leads in that journey. But not only that, it's a story about how the light of God shines so brightly for all the world to see, not just those in a corner of small town Bethlehem, not to those in one geographical area, but bright enough for those in the East – those from foreign lands, those 'others' not like us, it shines bright enough for them to see and follow as well! God's light shines for all, reminding us of those familiar words from the apostle Paul that God's love shows no partiality.

Wise men bring gifts as they follow the light of not the Super moon but the Super Star that lights up the night sky. This journey of kings or astrologers or wise men – they travel throughout history with many identities – what we know is that they are learned men, scholars, men of power and position in the gospel writer's mind. They follow the star which leads them to a manger and there, in the manger, the light of God is laying there in the form of a small and vulnerable baby. And that baby brings even these learned scholars to their knees in adoration and praise!

The message of Christmas Eve – that a light shines in the darkness – is made manifest on this Epiphany Sunday. This story of a baby born in a manger is a story of one named Jesus bringing God's light into the world, embodying what God is,

showing us the way of the Holy. That God took on human form says that we believe, we hold dear, a God who has felt and feels our joys and our sorrows, a God who walks beside us in our celebrations and our trials, a God who has cried, who has laughed, a God who understands us completely. That is the message, just like the Super Moon, just like that long ago Super Star, that shines out the darkness in our world.

There is another scripture companion on this Epiphany Sunday that accompanies the wise men. This companion actually walked hundreds of years before the three kings and so often walks with us during our Advent journey. I'm referring to the prophet Isaiah with his message about shining out the darkness. It's a message that molds all who hear it into active participants with a Get Up! and Get Going! Attitude: "Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

Just when we think it's over, the magic and goodwill of Christmas all packed away for another year, just when we think we're about to settle back into routine, just as the cold weather makes such an appearance which pushes us into modes of hibernation, the prophet Isaiah steps in with a message – and not just a message but marching orders to people who have walked in darkness, "Arise, shine, for your light has come!"

Do you notice how this isn't a polite invitation? The prophet doesn't say, "You are most cordially invited to arise and shine?" No, this is a command, an order, "Arise, shine, for your light has come!" just like the camp song we sang earlier. Rise and shine and give God your glory!

Isaiah's people had walked in darkness, had experienced exile and all that comes with it; fear, disorientation, loneliness, hopelessness. They were strangers in a strange land, not knowing what to hold onto, whether or not their God had deserted them, what their future held. We find words that describe this darkness in another book of the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Lamentations, "How lonely sits the city (Jerusalem) that was once full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations?" (Lam. 1:1)

Then the prophet Isaiah 'dares to imagine a new beginning' (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1 p. 197) He reminds the people of how God had been with them in their past. He reminded them of God's promises for the future, in poetic form, spoke of how the peaceable kingdom would be, when lion and lamb lie together. And, as one author put it, the call to prepare for God's arrival, the promise that

God would indeed ‘tear open the heavens and come down’ reaches a crescendo in today’s reading. “Arise, shine, for your light HAS come!” It’s not just about hoping, people, it’s happening!

It’s easy to understand why so much of Isaiah is often so much a part of the Christian faith story this time of year. Isaiah’s words read during Advent speak to our longings, our hope, our holding on to the promise. And the words from today’s scripture, the imperative from today’s reading, proclaims the Christmas story, that a Light came into the world, shines in the darkness. And we, like Isaiah, are called to dare to imagine a new beginning. The prophet calls us to get up, to reflect the light of God’s love that we see in the world, the prophet calls us to lift up our eyes and look around, look, look and marvel and wonder at God’s glory – to name it, hold on to it and share it with the world.

No, the darkness is not gone. A couple of years ago I read and shared words from an article by author Parker Palmer. In the article, he asked, “What is your New Year Revolution?” No, it wasn’t a typo or slip of the tongue. Little did I know two years ago how so very relevant these words are for today, for this new year. And please, I am not referring to overthrowing the government or impeachment here. Partisan politics have no place in the pulpit. Prophetic words calling us to a more just and compassionate way of life however? Always. And it seems to me that we as a country have become less civil with our words, less compassionate and just with how we treat one another, especially if the ‘other’ is different than ourselves.

Parker Palmer’s words ‘What is your New Year Revolution?’ call us to action, to shine out the darkness. Perhaps a way to begin with our New Year Revolution would be just to ‘be kind’. To make that our motto throughout all of the year. To be kind to ourselves, to each other, to strangers we meet, to those we disagree with, to be kind to the earth as in how we take care of it. To just be kind. Wouldn’t that in itself be the beginning of a revolution?

But don’t get me wrong. ‘Being kind’ does not mean keeping silent, does not mean not disagreeing, not standing up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, does not mean not working for peace and justice. The Kentucky Council of Churches hosts prayer in action days in Frankfort each Tuesday during the legislative session, to pray for our government officials and act on behalf of the most vulnerable in our Commonwealth. The Council consists of clergy, yes, but also laity, you and me together, and I invite any of you who would like to go with

me when I go to join me and other Christians. “Being kind’ involves continuing to be stand up but to be respectful, to be civil with each other.

And so, I ask again, as Parker Palmer asked in his article, what is your New Years Revolution? Because shining your light in the darkness, choosing joy, choosing love, choosing kindness over fear and bigotry and individualism; to choose to see AND to reflect the love of God that surrounds us in so many ways, is revolutionary...involving a fundamental change in how things are going at the present.

Arise, shine, your light has come!

No sitting around here, no taking a side seat where we can be unnoticed but out front, shining out the darkness, claiming god’s light not just in our lives, but for the world. The kings have gone their way, back to their homeland by another route. But we journey on, following the light of Christ and being that light for others.

I have on occasion share the following quote by Marianne Williamson. Since we’ve spent so much of Advent with the angel’s message ‘Do not be afraid’, I thought once again share her quote, for it speaks of a fear:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Let your light shine!