

"Recognizing Jesus"
Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12
January 9, 2022 Epiphany
York Center Church of the Brethren
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This week the Wednesday evening Zoom fellowship group had a conversation about when to take down your outside Christmas lights. (See what you are missing if you don't log on.) Some thought that it was time for the lights to be put away now. Others, me included, like to keep the outside lights up through the month of January. On long dark nights, I like to see the tiny white lights reflecting off the snow. You can't see those lights very well in the daytime but at night they are beautiful. For me, those lights in the cold night symbolize the light of Christ shining in the darkness and showing us the way.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, when the church remembers the visit of the Wise Men to the child Jesus. The early church celebrated Epiphany as the baptism of Jesus when his true identity was revealed.

"Epiphany" is defined as a divine manifestation in the midst of human history. It is the moment when an important truth suddenly becomes clear.

Epiphany is the time when we celebrate God's invitation for the world to meet and worship Jesus. Scripture shows us that it isn't always easy to recognize Jesus, especially in the dark.

The world, both in biblical times and now, is governed more by fear than by faith; more by exclusion than inclusion; more by darkness than by light. The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, knew all about darkness. In the middle of the sixth century, the people of God were enveloped in a fog of darkness so deep they could see no way out. Their holy city was destroyed. They were living in exile in Babylon, the home of their conquerors. The dynasty of the great King David has come to a terrifying end. They have no land, no leader, no temple, and for many, no faith.

They believe their God has forsaken and forgotten them. They are heartbroken and helpless. They have no future, and their past is quickly becoming a faded memory.

And then the prophet speaks an unlikely word from God. *"Wake up, people! Get up! Turn your face toward the sun and soak in the warmth of God's glory!"* He told them that even though the world where they were living was consumed with darkness their time of hiding in the shadows is over. A new day is dawning, and God expects them to get up and lead the way for others into the brilliance of God's presence.

This is not an invitation. It is a command. The people are called to step out of the season of darkness and run into the season of light. Through the grace of God, they are being called to move from absence to presence; from despair to hope; from fear to joy.

Isaiah tells them that something new is happening. It is something they could never have hoped for or dreamed of- God is moving decisively into their world and everything is going to change.

With God's intrusion they are called to look up and see the miraculous vision- all nations are streaming toward their holy city of Jerusalem, restored and splendid. Their sons and daughters who were sent away are returning and everyone will rejoice and celebrate!

These people, these prisoners, these exiles were defeated by their enemies. It is **these** people who will become a light to all the nations. Isaiah makes it very clear that the light of God is not to be hoarded or hidden in the temple. This light is for **all** nations, **all** peoples. Those who are blessed to stand in the light have a responsibility to respond to it, to share it, to shine it for all to see.

This was their epiphany- the moment when an important truth suddenly became clear and because of that, they could reinterpret their past and rethink their way forward in light of it. Isaiah's poetic words show them that the light of God isn't just for them even if they are the chosen people. Now they know that **all** people are God's chosen people. And that is a cause for celebration!

The light of God has ended their exile. God's presence creates new life for the whole creation. Through the words of Isaiah, God's universal love is made clear for all to see.

The light of God also pierced the darkness for those living in Palestine in the time of King Herod. The light of a star led foreign visitors to travel a great distance to see the revelation for themselves. This story from Matthew's gospel moves the birth of Jesus from the confines of the little town of Bethlehem to the world stage. His arrival terrifies and infuriates a tyrant and causes exotic Gentile travelers to fall to their knees in worship. In doing so, Matthew illustrates the world-altering ramifications of the arrival of this child, the Messiah. Now that he is here, the world cannot remain the same. All people will be drawn to his light.

The arrival of non-Jews in Bethlehem turns out to be a part of the divine plan, an accomplishment of the promises made by God long ago. Matthew's story shows very clearly both the threat and the promise of this child.

In the presence of the Holy One, the Wise Men bow in worship and offer extravagant gifts while King Herod and his cronies quake with fear and plot to destroy him. Not everyone who recognizes Jesus welcomes the light.

It feels as though we are among those who are living in a time of deep darkness. It is the time of Covid; the time of an attack on our nation's capital; the time of extreme and dangerous political division; the time of fighting over the life-saving value of masks and vaccines. Every day, all day we hear the reports of Covid deaths, hospitalizations, lack of medical resources, confusion over school policies. The last time I remember hearing such high daily death counts on the evening news was in the days of the Vietnam War.

We are living in a time of great anxiety and fear; a time of uncertainty when the rules are changing almost daily. What does that do to us? to our spirits? to our mental and physical health?

The church is called to be the presence of God's light in the world. How can we do that when we can't even meet together for worship in the same place?

How can we recognize Jesus in the midst of the prevailing gloom and deep shadows of suffering? The prophet Isaiah and the writer of Matthew's gospel both remind us that God's light shines in the darkness. It is precisely into the shadows of this world that Jesus was born. He isn't hidden. We are.

This season of Epiphany is our "Aha moment," our reminder that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. It is our reminder that even though Christmas has come and gone, that baby in the manger isn't gone- he has grown up, he has defeated the powers of death, and he calls us to follow him.

It is precisely into **this** world that he comes, into **our** world, into our nighttime; into the darkness that we create and the darkness which is thrust upon us.

He challenges our ignorance and our fear. He calls us to shine. With this knowledge we, together, can stare down the darkness and overcome it. With this knowledge we can lead others into the light of God's new day.

The birth of Jesus disrupted the world. He came as a revolution wrapped in a baby blanket. He came as the person and presence of God Almighty wearing our flesh and breathing our air.

In our journey to find Jesus we all get lost along the way. Sometimes we don't recognize him when he is standing right in front of us.

Epiphany encourages humble admission that God's glory may be made visible where we least expect it. Sometimes God's people become light for others; sometimes they appear blind to the light others can see. But always, the light is there, as God graciously, mysteriously, and defiantly breaks into human lives over and over again.

Let us awake and shine for our light has come!

Let us jump at the invitation to participate with God in this rebellion of grace.

Let us defy the powers that would have us believe that we must live in the darkness. And remember, sometimes the darkness is the best place to see the full blaze of the light.

I leave you with the words of poet Jan Richardson, "Blessed Are You Who Bear The Light."

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistenc
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.
Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,

in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

May it be so. Amen.