

The Way of Light  
Epiphany  
“We observed a star...that signaled his birth”  
Matt. 2:2  
January 6, 2019  
Pastor Jenothy

Prayer

Message:

A great darkness hung in the air...something had to change. The winds of political unrest crashed against the people. The hunger for power and the ability to control it devoured those who sought it and those who stood in it's way. The people were caught in currents of “they said”, “we said,” our word against yours, and many struggled to know what was Truth, and who they could trust. People were condemned, lived in hiding, or worse, were beaten, some almost to death because of who they loved. Others were ridiculed, shunned and marginalized for the color of their skin. Many were abused with words and fists, held back, or overlooked because of their gender. A great darkness indeed, surely something would change.

When do you think those words were written? What time in history? I don't know about you but I think they could be written at just about anytime throughout history, including today.

It's a new day - a new year. Happy New Year. December 25 has come and gone and with, the greatest story ever told is probably already boxed back up with the decorations and ready to go back down stairs, in the closet or up in the attic.

Today, I to ask you to wait, just a little longer. I ask you to keep one thing out this year...and here's why. Because we still need the message of the greatest story ever told. We still need the hope, joy and promise that comes with the telling and living of the story.

If the commercial and marketing experts can put Christmas and the holidays in front of us months before they begin, some as early as October, I figure I can keep them in front of you for a few more days.

There is still a great darkness in the world for a lot of people. I am not talking about “out there” or “over there” in the world. I am talking about right here, in this room, in our community, in our land of the free and home of the brave.

Today our lesson comes from the Magi - the three wise scholars who traveled to see the baby Jesus once he had been born. You know the story right? Hear it probably every year from the gospel of Luke. Mary, Joseph, the angels, shepherds, more angels, and then the magi.

Here is how the gospel of Matthew records the arrival and role of the star followers: READ TEXT

Political unrest. Government power struggles. Hunger for status and control. Poor decisions that impact the lives of the poorest among people. Senseless violence. Division. Brutality. I know it sounds like much of our world today, but it was actually the scene Jesus was born into.

Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome had all successively proven that "the world through its wisdom did not know God" (1 Corinthians 1:21). Even with all their mighty conquerors, poets, historians, architects, and philosophers, the kingdoms of the world were full of dark idolatry.

While we think of Christmas as a season of light, the truth is, the birth story of Jesus Christ is filled with darkness. Anticipating the birth of the Christ child centuries before Mary was great with child, Isaiah writes that the light that was coming into the world, came to a people shrouded in

darkness (9:1-7). Gloom, anguish, and contempt were just some of the adjectives used to describe this darkness.

In order to understand the full revelation of the light which came into the world when Christ was born, we need to recognize the darkness into which our Christ was born.

First, when Christ was born, the word of God had not been heard for four centuries. Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament, written in the fifth century BC. It concludes with the statement that God would send Elijah the prophet as a forerunner for the Messiah. But since that last pregnant statement, which would eventually be fulfilled in John the Baptist, God had been silent. And everyone knew it. Listen to some of the Jewish writers of the day.

Babylonian Talmud, Yomah 9b: 'After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel, but they still availed themselves of the voice from heaven'

1 Maccabees: 'So they tore down the altar and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them.'

Without the word of God present among them, the people walked in spiritual darkness.

Second, the people of God were under the oppressive rule of Rome. This is evident in the birth story of Jesus. Luke 2:1 records the census taken up by Caesar Augustus. It was a blatant reminder that the people of Israel were owned by another. Likewise, Herod, a descendant of Edom, ruled in Jerusalem. Long gone were the days of a beloved Davidic king. Much like today, soldiers walked the streets of Jerusalem. Only they were not 19-year old Israelis with M-16's. They were Roman guards, called to

police the city of David.

In some ways, Israel had escaped exile. No longer did they live in Babylon. But in many ways, they were exiles in their own country. Even their own temple was built by a foreigner—Herod the Great was a descendent of a rival nation. Political darkness reigned!

Third, the nation of Israel was fracturing. Four groups in Israel sought and fought to lead the people. (1) The Pharisees resided in Jerusalem. They attempted to shape religious life in Israel through their traditions. Jesus had many run-ins with these legalistic Jews, who led astray the people of God (cf. Matt 23). (2) Sadducees opposed the strict legalism of the Pharisees, and only embraced Moses law (Gen-Deut). They rejected the resurrection, belief in angels, but still had a influential place in the temple and law courts. (3) The Essenes, who lived in a commune near Qumran—they were the scribes who penned and preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls—lived an especially pure life. They devoted themselves to God, and prayed for God’s overthrow of Rome. (4) The Zealots were a band of brothers who did not pray for change so much as they sought violent means of overthrowing Roman rule.

The result of these four competing sects in Judaism led to constant friction, only increased by the oppressive rule of Rome. Riots were common. Tension was unceasing. Darkness permeated Judaism.

Fourth, the birth of Jesus came through a virgin. Now, in our day, we celebrate Mary as an example of devotion and faith. We send Christmas cards with creche scenes on them and sing songs praising God for this humble servant. But it was not so then. Matthew 1 records that Joseph, who was a righteous man, one who loved Mary, sought to divorce her quietly. Why? Because everyone knows how a child is conceived! Mary’s child would grow up ridiculed as the son of an unchaste women (cf John 8:41). A virgin birth was not a celebrated event in ancient Israel. Darkness

surrounded it!

Fifth, the census was a considerable imposition. Living in Nazareth, Mary and Joseph lived more than 100 miles North of Bethlehem. Yet, there was no way around it. They were forced by legal constraint to make the arduous trip. Without a highway, a car, a cushioned seat, or a suspension system; the teenage couple were forced to walk over hills and through streams. While we celebrate the pilgrimage today with illumined festivity. This was a long, dark and sometimes dangerous walk.

Sixth, the poverty of Mary and Joseph did not fit the royal son they had. Not only were the conditions leading up to Christ's birth dark, so too was his birth. Luke 2:7 records that there was "no place for them in the inn." This is probably because it was filled up with travelers coming for the census; but it may also be the case that Joseph, a carpenter by trade, did not have the means to pay for or to pay extra for a room. Money talks, right? But it is clear, that Joseph had no bargaining power. Mary and Joseph went to the stable, where Jesus was born and laid in a manger. Without family or hospitality, darkness surrounded them.

Seventh, through the hostile forces of Herod, there was a threat on Jesus life. Herod, so paranoid for his own position and power that he had multiple family members executed, attempts to use the wisemen to lead him to the Christ child—not to worship, but to exterminate. When he learns that the wisemen have not complied with his scheming, he orders the execution of all the children in and around Bethlehem. (Matt. 2:16)

Darkness is everywhere in Christ's birth, which should not come as a surprise when we think of the prophecies in the Old Testament and the conditions of the world that God created. As John 1 says, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world, . . . yet the world did not know him."

This is the great darkness to which Jesus was born in and for. When we consider that Christ came into such darkness in order to bring light, the truth is staggering, breathtaking, and beautiful. For we all face seasons of darkness, and God in the flesh knows exactly what that looks like and feels like.

God is the light who enlightens everyone, and has come to take up residence in the lives of those who look to Christ - those who seek him like the wise star followers. (David Schrock, *Darkness: The World In Which Christ Was Born* Dec. 12, 2011)

In the church year, the Epiphany season is when we remember a time when we walked in darkness, or tried to find our way through the shadowy places of life. We remember that there are still corners of our world today that walk in social, economical and political darkness; that our world today deals with spiritual darkness. Epiphany is the time we remember that it is in *that* darkness - the darkness of: cancer, addiction, tragedy, illness, childhood disease, senseless violence...Divine Light still shines. God's goodness and glory are brought forth in Jesus; his actions, teachings, miracles, and most of all his love.

This is the season to celebrate that God's love is love enough for all. That is what the story of the Magi is about; perceived outsiders coming to the new King, NOT just to find him but to worship him; to recognize his authority and call him King. God's love is love enough for all. The insiders, the outsiders, the uptowners and downtowners, residents and immigrants, foreign and domestic.

The light of God's love shines in the midst of our darkness - sometimes it is but a faint spark or flicker. Sometimes it is so bright hurts our eyes, or catches us by surprise. And sometimes it even reveals more than we want to see - calls us to see what is hard, demanding, scary about following Jesus.

Yet it is in this epiphany light and by this epiphany light we follow Jesus. The light of Epiphany brings to the surface questions like:

What areas of your life need more God light?

How can we be vessels of light - reflectors of light? Lighting the path for others - shining hope for the hopeless - showering grace to others?

What is it God is asking you to bring into the light of love?

How do you see the power and authority of God through Jesus?

What events can become epiphany moments; light switches of God's movement and presence for you?

How will you be different? Walk this journey of faith differently not just because you sang happy birthday to Jesus 12 days ago, but because God seeks to manifest God's love in our lives every single day?

Reading of the poem - Creator of the Stars

By Macrina Wiederkehr as quoted in Sacred Journeys by Jan L Richardson

Dear church, let us walk in the way of light, for our light has come and the dark will not overcome it.

AMEN