

The Three Kings

Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-18

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave., South Bend, Indiana 46616
The Epiphany of The Lord — January 7, 2018
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Isaiah 60:1-6 (NIV)

¹“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. ²See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. ³Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴“Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. ⁵Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. ⁶Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-18 (NIV)

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

¹³When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸ “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

The Three Kings

British pastor Geoff Thomas tells about an amusing event that took place sometime back at Bryan College in Dayton, Tennessee. A gifted preacher, Al Martin was preaching in the main auditorium of the college for a special conference, and the congregation was completely absorbed by what they were hearing. Then toward the end of the sermon, all the lights in the place went out. Now that’s not too unusual. All kinds of things can cause power failures. But you might be interested in what caused this interruption. It could only happen in our high tech world.

It seems that a trigger mechanism, a kind of sensor, had been connected to the main light switch of the auditorium. The purpose of this mechanism was to conserve energy. The sensor caused the lights in the room to automatically be extinguished when no one was detected as being in the room. In other words, if there was no movement at all for a certain period of time —say, a quarter of an hour — then automatically the lights went off. The engineers had calculated that it wouldn’t be possible for people to sit motionless for that period of time, and the instruments were calibrated accordingly.

So here was a congregation completely hushed, attentive, and totally gripped by the message being delivered by a gifted communicator, when suddenly, because they were so still, they were plunged into total darkness. Pastor Martin ignored what was happening and kept preaching and the room remained in darkness. When he finished his sermon, he said, “Let us pray.” At this instruction, many in the congregation shifted in their seats, leaned forward and bowed their heads — and that movement caused all the lights to come back on again.

It’s a funny world, this high tech world of ours. I thought of that interesting little story as I considered the meaning of Epiphany, when the light of Christ came into a dark world. This is that Sunday when we celebrate the coming of the magi to worship the Christ child. You know the story well. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow described the event in his poem “The Three Kings,” which includes these lines:

For we in the East have seen His star, And have ridden fast, and have ridden far, To find and worship the King of the Jews.” And the people answered, “You ask in vain; We know of no King but Herod the Great!” They thought the Wise Men were men insane, As they spurred their horses across the plain, Like riders in haste, who cannot wait.

And when they came to Jerusalem, Herod the Great, who had heard this thing, Sent for the Wise Men and questioned them; And said, “Go down unto Bethlehem, And bring me tidings of this new king.”

So they rode away; and the star stood still, The only one in the grey of morn; Yes, it stopped — it stood still of its own free will, Right over Bethlehem on the hill, The city of David, where Christ was born.

And the Three Kings rode through the gate and the guard, Through the silent street, till their horses turned And neighed as they entered the great inn-yard; But the windows were closed, and the doors were barred, And only a light in the stable burned.

And cradled there in the scented hay, In the air made sweet by the breath of kine, The little child in the manger lay, The child, that would be king one day Of a kingdom not human, but divine.

His mother Mary of Nazareth Sat watching beside His place of rest, Watching the even flow of His breath, For the joy of life and the terror of death Were mingled together in her breast. They laid their offerings at His feet: The gold was their tribute to a King, The frankincense, with its odor sweet, Was for the Priest, the Paraclete, The myrrh for the body’s burying.

And the mother wondered and bowed her head, And sat as still as a statue of stone, Her heart was troubled yet comforted, Remembering what the Angel had said Of an endless reign and of David’s throne.

Then the Kings rode out of the city gate, With a clatter of hoofs in proud array; But they went not back to Herod the Great, For they knew his malice and feared his hate, And returned to their homes by another way.

Thus wrote Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

We know the basic theme of Epiphany well. The magi followed a star to where the Christ child lay. The star, besides guiding the magi to the house where the Christ child lay, is symbolic of the coming of light — the light of Christ — into the world. The world was sitting in darkness, just as the congregation at Bryan College sat in darkness — until the congregation bowed to pray — and the lights came back on.

CHRIST TRULY IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

That is the most important truth we can affirm this day. Without Christ’s presence, the world would indeed be dark.

There is an old story of a young man dying on a battlefield who asks for a chaplain. “Give me a light, chaplain,” he says. The chaplain finds a cigarette and starts to put it between the boy’s lips and the young man whispers, “No — no chaplain. The other kind of light.”

The chaplain reaches into his pocket and brings out a New Testament and begins to read, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12)." "That's it. That's it," whispers the young soldier as he lapses into unconsciousness and death. That was the light he needed! It is the light all of us need!

Einstein argued that at the speed of light there is an eternal now. He postulated that time and space are relative to the speed of light; light is the constant. "We modern people think Einstein thought that up," writes Peter Hiatt in his book, *Eternity Now!* "Yet two thousand years earlier, John wrote, 'God is light' (1 John 1:5), and he recorded Jesus saying, 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12). John taught that Jesus is the Word, and the Word is the Light. All things were made through Him and are relative to Him."

Think how important light is. Without light life on earth would be impossible. Back in the 1970s a man named John Ott did some fascinating research on how different types of light affect plants, animals, and people. Here are some of his findings:

Plants only bloom under certain light conditions and/or with certain ratios of daytime to nighttime. Mice live twice as long with daylight as opposed to either fluorescent or incandescent lighting. Hens live twice as long, lay more eggs with 25% less cholesterol, and are less aggressive in natural or full spectrum light (vs. fluorescent or incandescent light).

School children are calmer and less hyperactive with full spectrum light (vs. fluorescent or incandescent light). I guess this means we need skylights in our schools.

Here's one I thought was interesting: Baseball players who switched from wearing pink tinted sunglasses to medium gray tinted sunglasses became less irritable, more relaxed and confident, and performed better. So, those of you who are ball players, ditch the pink-tinted glasses. Restaurant workers who worked in a facility with black light ultraviolet lights were especially healthy and congenial.

Some of those findings are mere curiosities, but light is critically important. When God created the world, the first thing He said was what? That's right, "Let there be light (Genesis 1:3)!" Without light there is no life. Without Christ there is no life abundant. That's what we mean when we say, Christ is the light of the world. Of course there is a problem:

NOT EVERYONE WANTS TO LIVE IN THE LIGHT.

Some people actually prefer to live in darkness. "When the Bastille, a castle-like prison in Paris, was about to be destroyed in 1789, a convict was brought out who had been confined in one of its gloomy cells for many years. But instead of joyfully welcoming his liberty, he begged to be taken back. It had been such a long time since he had seen the sunshine that his eyes could not endure its brightness. His only desire was to die in the murky dungeon where he had been a captive." Some people have lived in the dark for so long that they are literally afraid of the light. Light reveals what they would prefer to keep hidden.

Rev. Paul Pattison tells about a practice that some carpet cleaning businesses sometimes use to get pet owners to employ their services. To show potential customers their need for the service, they darken the room and then turn on a powerful black light. The black light causes crystals from certain pet stains on their customers' carpets to glow brightly.

To the horror of the homeowner every drop and dribble can be seen, not only on the carpet, but usually on walls, drapes, furniture, and even on lamp shades. One salesman tells the story of a homeowner who begged him to shut off the light: "I can't look at it anymore. I don't care what it costs. Please clean it up!" Another woman said, "I'll never be comfortable in my home again."

The stains were there all the time, but they were invisible until the right light exposed them. "It would have been cruel to show customers the extent of their problem and then say, 'Too bad for you' and walk away," says Pattison. But now that these stains had been brought to light most of the householders desperately wanted the cleaning services.

Not everyone wants to live in the light. Some people don't want their lives to be that transparent. But to those willing to open their lives to Christ's light, there is healing and wholeness and life abundant.

WHEN WE LIVE IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST WE BECOME A NEW CREATION.

"You are the light of the world," said Jesus to his followers. "A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16)."

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, that pioneer on dying and how it relates to living, once wrote: "People are like stained glass windows: they sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within." In 1 Peter 2:9 we read, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light."

Someone put it this way: "Suppose you were about to enter Heaven, and stopped to make a few remarks to people on earth. Suppose at the same moment a sunbeam were leaving the sun, and that your words and the ray of light had the same distance to reach the earth. In eight minutes the people on earth would see that sunbeam; but your voice would not reach them for 1,936 minutes, because sound is so much slower than light." Yet there are so many people who would rather talk than shine!

Interesting analogy. How we live is so much more important than what we say. May the light of Christ so shine in our hearts that our lives may glow with the light of Christ's love for all to see so that others will desire the light of Christ in their lives as well. God bless and amen.

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