

**The Feast of the Epiphany
January 6, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Happy New Year! The first Sunday after New Year's Day. And, today is the Feast of the Epiphany. The twelve days of our Christmas season are over. The Advent wreath and the Christmas candle are back in the closet until next year. Yet we are still hearing part of the Christmas story in the Gospel reading this morning ... the visit of the Three Magi ... the Three Wise Men ... those Wisdom Seekers.

Many years ago, I went to a New Year's Day party at parishioner's home and they had a wonderful collection of the Three Wise Men. There were molded ceramic figures, ones formed of handmade pottery, carved wood, and even rigid fabric. There were traditional hand painted Magi, but there were also contemporary sets, ethnic interpretations, even one set of these Wisdom Seekers that was rather cartoonish. One set was obviously Three Wise Women! But, nowhere did I see a manger with animals, and shepherds, and angels. When I asked our host about them, and why no manger, he had an interesting answer.

He and his wife were married on a Saturday shortly after Christmas. It turned out to be a year when the Feast of the Epiphany fell on Saturday ... the same Saturday that they were married. My host that New Year's Day ... and the groom at the wedding ... was named Joseph Matthews. For a wedding gift, his bride gave him a set of the Three Wise Men ... in honor of Epiphany was her stated intention. However, he told me that it was so he would never forget their wedding anniversary. However, perhaps the most interesting reason she gave him this gift was that the story of the Three Wise Men is from Matthew's gospel ... and that was now her surname. Moreover, each year since their wedding day she would give him another set of Wisdom Seekers as an anniversary gift. No manger ... just Magi.

The story of the birth of Jesus that we read in Luke on Christmas Eve is different from this story in Matthew that we heard this morning. Luke has the manger. And Luke also has the angels who come to the shepherds. On the other hand, Matthew says nothing about a manger and there are no shepherds. There is only one angel, and that angel comes to Joseph in a dream. And, of course, Matthew has the Three Magi which we heard about this morning.

Luke tells the story of the birth of Jesus one way ... Matthew tells the story another way. But what about the similarities in the two narratives? In both stories Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Both stories feature Mary as the mother of Jesus ... and Joseph is Mary's husband. And both feature darkness ... and stars or a star that breaks through the darkness. In Luke the angels

come to the shepherds in the star-filled night, and in Matthew the Three Magi follow a star to the baby Jesus.

It is this aspect of the story that intrigues me ... that like the lesson from Isaiah about light in the darkness ... the stories of Jesus' birth in both Luke and Matthew are about light shining forth in the darkness.

Interestingly, the Church chose December 25 as the day to celebrate the birth of Jesus because ... with a little fudging of the calendar ... it was the darkest night of the year. The birth of Jesus brings light to the darkness ... and that light is for the whole world. That is why this day is called Epiphany. The word is of Greek origin and means "manifestation" or "startling appearance." It is often used to speak of the dawn of a new day, and the manifestation of the divine. In this case, with the visit of the non-Jewish Magi, it is a narrative telling the story of the manifestation of Jesus, the Holy Child of God, to the world at large. It is the dawn of a new age. It is the light in the midst of darkness.

But darkness is like a tyrant ... it can cause overwhelming fear. When the Magi showed up on Herod's doorstep ... remember, Herod was the King of Israel ... when the Wise Men showed up on his doorstep they were looking for the infant child who was destined to be the "King of the Jews." Not surprisingly, Herod saw his power threatened and he sought to destroy the baby Jesus ... so he plotted to use the Magi as an instrument of his madness. However, after honoring the Holy Family with rich gifts these Wisdom Seekers were "warned by God in a dream" not to return to Herod. The Magi ... these Three Wise Persons ... showed their wisdom and went back to their home "by another way" ... another way that did not include reporting to Herod as he had commanded them to do.

In the very next verse of Matthew's gospel the angel came back to Joseph in a dream. It was the same angel ... the angel Gabriel ... that had announced to Joseph that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Only this time the angel warned Joseph to take Mary and the child ... Jesus ... and flee to the safety of Egypt, and therefore escape the wrath of Herod.

When Herod realized that the Magi had disobeyed his orders he was enraged. In his anger he ordered the "Slaughter of the Innocents." This portion of the story is not included in this morning's reading ... it was probably deemed too violent for Sunday family worship. But Herod demanded that every male child two years or under living in the environs of Bethlehem be put to death. In a classic tactic of tyrants Herod had responded to the threat against his power with indiscriminate killing ... the collateral damage was high, and yet the specific one targeted, Jesus, had escaped.

This was the darkness of the world into which Jesus was born. And this is the darkness of the world into which Jesus would be born if he were to come back today. The tyrants of our world today are just as brutal as they were 2,000 years ago. Yet his light shone in the darkness then, and it continues to shine today.

In his life and ministry Jesus taught of what he called the “Kingdom of God.” He included at his table those who were outcast and marginalized. He offered healing to those who lame, sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf. He wept with the grieving, and shared what little he had with the poor. In his parables he turned the world upside-down. He ridiculed unjust judges, insincere religious leaders, and stingy people of wealth. He exalted the poor who were generous, the sinners who prayed, and the meek who sought justice through peaceful means. Why wouldn’t an oppressive tyrant like Herod be threatened? Jesus was calling the powerful to use their authority for the common good, not just their own benefit and security. Jesus believed all should have enough to eat, that everyone deserved shelter from the elements, that justice was based on what was “right” not on special interests, or how deep one’s pocket was. Jesus demanded equity, and he practiced equality. Of course a tyrant would be threatened, and the tyrants of today still threatened by those who take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

Tyrants ... the dealers in darkness ... have names and faces, whether it be Herod 2,000 years ago or Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Bashar al-Assad of Syria, Vladimir Putin of Russia, or Kim Jong-Un of North Korea in this millennium. Tyrants are bullies. Tyrants will hold nations hostage for their self-serving interests, and just to get their way. Tyrants manufacture their own truth. We know tyrants by the trail of destruction they leave behind,

However, some tyrants that provoke death-dealing fear have names, but do not have a face. In the midst of this worship this morning we will offer our prayers for the healing of those who are ill. Our prayer list is punctuated with the names of those who are a part of this community, and those known to the members of this congregation, who are struggling with injuries from tragic accidents, or are living with cancer, chronic breathing problems, addictions, deteriorating health, and life-threatening diseases. Right here in our midst this tyrant that brings darkness to our lives condemns innocents to a slaughter of what we call “natural causes,” yet the fear it engenders speaks to a power of darkness that permeates our world today.

So, how do we respond to these tyrannies? How do we choose to live with this darkness? How do we make sense out of these events which is so incomprehensible? Is there anything we can do to make a difference?

I would like to think that we might find some consolation in the teachings of Jesus. However, I believe that what we find is as much a challenge as it is a comfort. People around the world live under the darkness of oppression of one kind or another. Whether it be international terrorism, or domestic violence of a mass shooting, or the home-front intimidation of a deadly disease, it nonetheless provokes a tyranny of fear. Yet, in the midst of that fear there are those who respond with sincere compassion to those caught in its grasp. As you know well, the word “compassion” literally means to “suffer with.” Our consolation at times like this is in the shared pain we feel with those directly impacted by fear.

Jesus wept with those who grieved, just as we weep with those who suffer around the world, and in our own community. Each tear we shed is a prayer of shared pain with another who is living in the real suffering of loss, or fear, or illness. Shedding a tear may feel like one is living in darkness, yet I believe that when that tear is one of compassion it is a flicker of light to all our souls.

In this season of the Incarnation we are called to do no less than to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. In his teachings Jesus connected himself to those who were at the edge of society. He told the crowds to mourn for those who mourn. Grieve for those who have lost their sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sister and brothers. Cry for those who no longer have a home, or food to eat, or clean water to drink. Shed a tear for those who have lost all means of providing support for a family. Open your hearts now, and forever more, to those who suffer from natural and human-caused tragedies ... the tyranny of fear. Be a light in other's darkness.

Let meekness and humility be your hallmark, taught Jesus. Refuse to make havoc in the name of liberation. Be peacemakers, taught Jesus. Refuse to make war as a so-called weapon of peace. Instead, said Jesus, be pure of heart. Act without guile, without greed. Be merciful, said Jesus who ate with the outcast of his society. For those that are weaker, poorer, simpler than you, demand a fair world. Seek equity and practice equality.

Finally, in the face of the tragedies of nature, and the tragedies of tyrants, when we feel most impotent to help those who suffer the most, when our world seems darkest, Jesus says to be still in your own heart. Be still in your own heart and the world around you will be still also. My faith is one that believes that when any of us are wounded, God feels the pain. God's heart is broken by the tragedies of this world ... we see that in the actions of God's son, Jesus. If we really believe that God came alive in Jesus, and God can come alive in us, then we are called to help heal the wound felt in the heart of God as we live into the gift God gave us in the incarnation.

In a world beset by tyrants, tyrannies and tragedies we are perplexed, and in our confusion we often feel hopeless, frightened, and impotent. We suffer with those who are suffering the deepest. In that suffering we are all connected, one to another, as children of God. It gives us the opportunity to see this world as one unit ... God's world ... and the people suffering half way around the world as our brothers and sisters, just as are the people in our own backyard.

The Three Magi came to pay tribute to the new light in the darkness. This was the Epiphany ... the startling appearance and manifesting of the divine ... God's beloved son. Those Wisdom Seekers followed a star in the darkness and brought gifts. However, Jesus came into a world of darkness and tyranny. Jesus brought God into the world to transform that tyranny. The Epiphany ... this startling appearance ... is light in the darkness.

I close with a poem by the great African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader Howard Thurman. It is called The Work of Christmas:

When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes have gone home
When the shepherds are back with their flock
That is when the work of Christmas begins
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoners
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace to us all
To make music in the heart.

Amen.