

Meditation January 5, 2014 Epiphany Sunday Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12, 13-23
“Light in the Midst of Darkness”

The phone rang fairly late one night, and my out-of-town friend’s voice greeted me with the statement, “I called because I am looking for some light in a dark time...” Her mother had just started chemotherapy for her surprise diagnosis of breast cancer, double lung cancer, and involvement of lymph nodes.... The week before, the mother had been playing tennis, feeling great and having no symptoms at all... An annual mammogram began the revelation of terrible darkness for the entire family.... “I am looking for some light in a dark time...”

So it has been, for thousands of years, that human beings have yearned for answers and reassurance, hope and comfort, in times of trouble and darkness. War, grief, illness, relationship problems, disaster, accident – whatever the pain, brokenness or uncertainty of the world or of our lives, darkness causes us to search more diligently for a Source of security and hope.

It was this way back in the time of Isaiah, as people waited in exile, and as they returned to their land to find their homeland in ruins, devastated by wars and famines... To these people came God’s word of hope through the prophet: “Arise, shine... Your light has come.”

In the day of Jesus’ birth, the Roman occupation of Israel was harsh and the times were very difficult. The gospel-writer Matthew tells the story of God’s light coming through the birth of a baby, but he wants us to realize that the Light God gave was given in a terribly dark time for God’s people. The angels of Christmas don’t sing today; they warn of profound danger. The couple can no longer spend time enjoying their new baby boy, they must spend some ten days doing twenty miles a day over dangerous terrain to save their child’s life. They are refugees...Perhaps they survive by selling the gifts the wise men had brought. The only thing going for them, supporting them through the fearful ordeal, was God’s presence with them.

Matthew also wants us to see that the first ones to *notice* the Light were not Jews, but Gentiles, wise men or kings, astronomers from a far-off land. Understand this: GENTILES (non-Jews) were the first to recognize that the King had been born. Gentiles were the first to make a long and dangerous trip to see and worship him... The Gospel of Matthew wants us to understand that God’s Light, which Jesus told his followers to share even to the ends of the world (Matthew 28), was first made clear to those who were outside the faith.... “Arise, shine...”

So today, celebrating Epiphany, we remember how the foreigners came and brought gifts to the true King, how they recognized the star which signified that God was doing something big to shine Light into the dark, disheartening world. Today, we also have come to worship the King, to offer what we can as gifts in response to God giving us the Light.

What do we offer? Jesus counseled his followers: “Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your works and give glory to God...” “Don’t hide your light under a bushel...”

Retired Methodist Bishop William Willimon once offered a story about a grandmother who went to

a study her church was having on prison ministry. When she got back home she went down to the prison and talked to the sheriff to ask about the needs of the prisoners. The sheriff was not very open to new ideas, but the next week when the woman came she brought two plates of chocolate chip cookies—one for the prisoners and one for the guards. The sheriff shook his head but took the cookies. The next week she was back with two more plates of cookies. The problems of our prison system are complex, and there is no obvious solution. But this grandmother who never met a prisoner, who hardly got to know the guards, made a huge difference.

Each week everyone at the prison would be waiting for the cookies. The prisoners would ask anxiously, “Has she come yet?” Each of these people receiving a gift—an undeserved, tangible, intimate gift—received blessing. One elderly woman following a star, bearing gifts of chocolate chip cookies.... “Arise, shine, for your light has come...” (*Word & Witness*, issue uncertain)

Hence, the season of Epiphany. Epiphany is the season when we say, “Okay, Christmas happened and is over for a year; God has come to us in human flesh to save us from our sins... The Light of the world is here...So now what??”

Epiphany is the time to look for the Light, to notice it in our lives. Epiphany is a season of mission, when we search for ways to offer OUR gifts to Jesus. How do we do this? Perhaps by offering our hearts to him when we come forward to receive the communion meal... Surely by offering our lives to him as we try to help someone else who is going through a dark time....

“Arise, shine, for your light has come...” We who are Christian believe that the Light has come, that Jesus is “God-with-us,” and that in Jesus God has given us the best and most significant gift ever possible. We also believe that we are to get up and share the Gift with others once we have discovered the truth of it for our own lives.

“I am looking for some light in a dark time...” We know darkness. We have walked there..Much of our world seems to be there now... But we are people who have been given a promise: that it is PRECISELY to those who find themselves in darkness that God is most eager to offer light and hope. Jesus came as a Light that nothing, not betrayal, not sin, not even death, can ever blow out. The Light shines on. It is holy light as we let it direct our living. In Jesus’ name, Amen.