

"Light of Light"  
Isa. 60:1-6; Eph3:1-2,8-12; Matthew 2:1-12  
January 8, 2017  
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church  
Dr. Catherine Taylor

What fun to wind up the 12 days of Christmas with snow,  
unless of course you've been bundled up without supplies all weekend  
or your back is aching from shoveling.  
One pastor friend of mine put on Facebook that  
his family does not eat bread or drink milk  
but he went out and bought some because he wrote  
"I live in the South and that's what you do."  
In Atlanta yesterday at my son's house,  
they didn't have snow they had an ice storm,  
where our new granddaughter was spending her second day at home  
the ice took out the power.  
It won't be back on until tomorrow,  
so son and wife and baby bundled off  
to her parent's house across town.  
We have been lucky, then, here to have only snow,  
filling the air with light, and bouncing off every surface  
suffusing everything with a soft glow.  
Snow can make the world look completely different,  
revealing certain kinds of beauty to us  
which are indeed always there  
but which we either can't or don't see.  
So it is fitting that on this Epiphany Sunday  
when we celebrate God's power to transform the world,  
our world has been transformed and is aglow with light.

Light is the primary symbol of Epiphany  
as our hymns and liturgy and our children's sermon makes plain today.  
Oddly enough, today the lectionary goes backwards  
to pick up the story of the wise men, the magi,  
being guided to the manager by starlight,  
even though we already heard last week  
about them asking for the whereabouts of the newborn king,  
and Herod's violent response.  
But there is none of that tension in our readings today.  
Just Isaiah's triumphant shout for Israel to arise  
for the Light of God has come,  
telling the people to arise and shine so much  
that other nations will also be drawn to God's light.  
Paul's words to the Ephesians take this further,  
announcing that a great mystery has now been revealed

the mystery that Gentiles are part of God's people.  
So participation in the gift of God's light  
means accepting and proclaiming  
the inclusion of *all* who were once considered outsiders.  
But stories are always the best way to make a point:  
Again, the baby born in the manger  
is not just a *Savoir* to his own people.  
Wise men journey long miles from the east  
to worship him and bring him gifts  
that represent the wealth of nations.  
They are led there by light itself, starlight.  
This day it is revealed that a Jewish baby  
is King and Savior of all, *Savoir* of the Eastern sages,  
of a Canaanite woman, of Roman centurions,  
of you and me.

The word epiphany means "to show" or even to manifest.  
It's not show in the simple sense but in the deepest meaning possible,  
the way snow on every branch and post  
can show you that your unremarkable backyard or street  
has the ability to be a gleaming palace of light.  
We've all had the kinds of moments called epiphanies,  
when something came together in our heads or hearts  
and we suddenly understood in a completely new way.  
I remember vividly having an epiphany  
in the car on the way home from the hospital  
with my first baby in my arms.  
It was the realization that violence is always an act of insanity,  
that there is no person on the earth who was not once  
as helpless as the child in my arms,  
as deserving of protection and safety and love,  
that we are all children of God  
and that the ways we divide ourselves up  
and try to wall ourselves off are preposterous.  
I felt that same epiphany again on Monday to a lesser degree  
comparing photographs of our new granddaughter's tiny nose  
to pictures of our son on the day he was born.  
We will leave Thursday to see her in person for the first time.

What epiphanies have been given to you  
and have you done anything to help birth them?

There is an Epiphany tradition that emerged  
out of the Eastern Orthodox Church  
that several of my clergy friends have adopted in their churches.  
Each year at Epiphany they offer their congregation "star words,"

a word printed inside a paper star.  
People choose a word at random from a box or basket.  
They take their word home,  
post it in a place where it can be seen regularly,  
and then use the word as a way to reflect during the year  
on who God is calling them to be  
and what God might be calling them to do.  
This year I thought we might try that tradition here at BPC, too.  
So I got a list of 500 words from my friend Beth.  
And today there is a basket filled with 500 cards  
for you to pick from.  
On every card there is a printed star  
and inside the star a single word.  
500 cards, 500 stars, 500 different words.  
The idea is that you simply reach in  
not looking or choosing, but letting the random word you pick  
come to have an impact on you.  
Now that the tradition has been going for ten years in Beth's church,  
each year on Epiphany Beth invites anyone who wants to  
to share what their word has meant to them.  
That's also something we can if we want to  
a year from now.

Beth has been using star words for over a decade now.  
Every year she pins the newest one above the others  
on a spot above her desk at home.  
Only once in ten years, she tells me, has she gotten a word that  
somehow didn't work for her.

Her other words have been profound,  
and she has been able to mine their depths.  
Even so, the revelation in the year of the "so so" word  
was "that not everything, not every word or every moment  
can bear the weight of revelation.  
"Perhaps our job as those who follow in the way of Christ  
is to hone our own sense of wisdom and discernment,  
so that we don't just follow any old star.  
We follow the ones that promise more  
than superficial shiny prettiness.  
We learn to suss out the real from the artificial,  
and we become wiser men and women in the process."<sup>ii</sup>  
I think Beth is right that we have a role in the process,  
that we can choose to stay on paths that lead in deeper insight.

One of those paths seems especially pertinent just now to me.  
It's the path that insists that worship is revelation, not relaxation,

it's epiphany, not entertainment.  
Not long ago our youngest members sang in worship  
with their whole hearts. It was precious. It made us happy  
and applause broke out. Of course it did.  
But seated up there behind the communion table I physically winced,  
and I want to share why.  
We are living in time when the line between  
event and entertainment has disappeared.  
Even the news we read or listen to,  
which once at least sought to be unbiased and objective,  
even news reporting is now--perhaps irretrievably—  
intertwined with entertainment  
as news outlets compete for an audience.

We are experiencing the consequences  
of what educator Neil Postman predicted in his 1985 book  
*Amusing Ourselves to Death:*  
*Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.*  
Postman warned of the dangers of medicating ourselves into bliss,  
thereby voluntarily sacrificing our rights and our responsibilities.  
The dangers of entertainment, he thought, are far greater  
than the dangers of political tyranny.

The church can and must be a stronghold, a sanctuary in the truest sense,  
where entertainment does not rule.  
And this is particularly true for our children,  
who are constantly called on to "perform,"  
in school, on the sports field, in the band or music room,  
and even in the parts of their lives  
that are supposed to be devoted to play.

Now more than ever the church needs to be  
a place of epiphany, not entertainment.

Now more than ever the church needs to be a great relief  
to know that nothing that happens in this room is entertainment.  
What happens here is praise, prayer, proclamation.  
Every hymn, every anthem, every prelude, postlude,  
reading, recitation, every silence in this space is an offering to God.  
When our children sing, they are not singing for us,  
though some of them are too young to know that yet.  
They are making an offering to God on their behalf,  
on our behalf and on behalf of the world.  
And I hope out of the joy of singing or playing.  
We should no more clap for them  
than we would clap after a prayer.

When I told Robert that I planned to say what I just said  
he warned me some people might just hear it as a scolding,

so I need to say that's not at all what I intend.  
What I long for, for you and for our children and for myself  
is a place of safety from the great lie that how well you are loved  
depends on how well you do.  
I'm kind of sorry that the snow has kept some of us away.  
And I hope you will share what I have said and we'll will talk about it.  
So that everyone can learn this idea. And think it over.  
We need to talk about it.  
This is that place where love has no price,  
where grace is free and un-earnable,  
and where inclusion is a given.  
That, says Paul is the great mystery of the gospel.  
And in the present moment  
we have got to work to keep this place a sanctuary.

As we enter into this New Year,  
as the days gradually grow lighter,  
I invite us all to take with us today  
the salient features, the truths of this Epiphany story.  
The Magi looked up into the sky, saw the star and asked,  
"What star is this?" and they wondered enough to follow,  
not knowing where it might lead.  
Herod heard about the star, and asked, "What star is this?"  
and when he was given an answer,  
he feared, because he believed  
the star foretold bad news for him.  
We hear the story of the star and learn  
that God meant for the light of Christ to shine for all the world.  
The story clearly teaches us that there are choices to make  
when faced with the light of God's revelation.  
And today we are invited to hold a star in our hands  
and know that, in reality, our season of revelation, of epiphany  
is just beginning.  
So I invite you to take a star word from the basket at the back  
as you go out and ask yourself, "What star is this?"  
as you ponder your new star word.  
To ask how might this star lead me?  
Look your new star word up in a dictionary, or even in a concordance.  
Put it somewhere where you will see it often.  
Take it to heart, and see if it somehow begins to show you  
how you are being called to change and grow in faith.  
As you do remember that, like the wise ones of old,  
we are not expected to follow the light of the star alone. AMEN.

*Please pray with me: Holy God, May the angels of light glisten for us this day.  
May the sparks of God's beauty dance in the eyes of those we love. May the new*

*sun's rising grace us with gratitude, May your light glisten in all things this day.  
May they summon us to reverence. May they call us to life. AMEN.*

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<sup>i</sup> John Morgan, Atlanta

<sup>ii</sup> The Reverend Beth Newman, Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church, Asheville NC. Much of the closing lines of this sermon uses Beth's language, too.