

“A Message We Still Need to Hear”
Isaiah 60:1–6; Ephesians 3:1–12; Matthew 2:1–12
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It is that time of year when we have a debate in our household about how long to leave up the Christmas decorations. We have a similar debate in the church but for slightly different reasons. We use live greenery here, and it goes up near the beginning of Advent. So, by the time the liturgical Christmas season is over, on Epiphany, which is technically January 6, some of our decorations are looking pretty dismal, not to mention dried out and perhaps a fire risk.

At home, it is just a matter of how long the decorations have been up and when we have time to get them down. Practical concerns argue for taking them down pretty quickly now, but they are Christmas decorations and Christmas is not over until Epiphany. Cultural Christmas, the great shopping spree and gift exchange, Santa Claus and Rudolph, may be, but not the real Christmas! It’s not that I am anti-culture or a liturgical fundamentalist. I just like to preserve the whole season, and I think we need to hold on to Epiphany and all that it means.

It is the oldest celebration of Incarnation. It is not an afterthought or add-on, as it often seems in our culture. It is about more than one story, though the story of the Magi bringing gifts to the Christ-Child and dodging Herod along the way launches its themes. But there are many traditional Epiphany texts, not all of which we read today, and at its core, the day and season following it are about God’s revelation of love to the world, God’s manifestation of light to overcome darkness. That is a message we still need to hear.

All of the texts we have read today proclaim this message and each of them begins with an assumption of darkness. Isaiah’s declaration, “Arise, shine; for your light has come,” presupposes a context of darkness. And indeed, the prophet continues, saying, “For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.” Scholars debate

the precise date of this oracle, but its context is the Babylonian exile. It is a word of hope, but it comes in the context of despair.

The people have known great suffering at the hands of a foreign oppressor. In fact, Israel's history is defined by oppression at the hands of a long line of foreign powers — Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. But it's not just that they lack the military strength to withstand stronger empires — though they certainly do — it's that their political and military struggles are a symptom of their spiritual struggles, their unfaithfulness to God. Thus, the darkness that defines them is not just external; it is internal as well.

Darkness is also seen in the reading from Matthew, deep darkness. The Magi come from a distant land, in response to a vision they have seen in the context of their faith — a star in the sky — to offer worship to the Messiah, but they have to go through Herod to get to Bethlehem. This Herod, Herod the Great, was known for his paranoia and brutality. He had several of his sons and one of his wives killed because he thought they were plotting against him. Caesar Augustus supposedly said it was safer to be Herod's pig than his son because as a Jewish leader, he could not eat pork, but he did slaughter his sons.

Matthew says that when the Magi tell Herod about a child born king of the Jews, Herod is frightened and all of Jerusalem with him, and well they should be! When this man is frightened, people die! And, as we know, this time, it will be children, as Herod has all of the children around Bethlehem two years old and under killed in an effort to get Jesus. If that is not darkness, I don't know what is! It takes a twisted soul driven by narcissistic yearnings to care so much about your place that you are willing to take the lives of hundreds of innocents.

And yet, it is not just Isaiah and Matthew who know darkness; so do we. It comes in many different shapes and forms — in the suffering of people during civil war in Syria, Afghanistan and Myanmar... in the recurrent realities of genocide in Nazi Germany, Soviet Siberia and Rwanda... in the horrors of human trafficking... in the hunger of starving children in a world where there is enough for all; yet also closer to home, in the brutal realities of addiction and abuse... in the near genocide enacted by our forbearers who sought to remove the natives of

this land... in our original sin of slavery, the consequences of which plague us to this day... in the poverty and homelessness that exist in this wealthy land. Darkness does cover the earth, thick darkness the peoples.

There is darkness in this world, but there is also light. This is the focus of our reading from Isaiah. The context is darkness, but the people already know all about this. The news here is that light is coming, hope to conquer despair. Sons and daughters will be returned, wealth will come from land and sea, the people will rejoice! They will return to their land after years in exile and everyone will be welcomed home, including the tribes who had been cut out.

It is easy to miss this last detail. We note the reference to gold and frankincense and see a link to the story about the Magi. The additional reference to camels from Midian and Ephah seems to underscore this link. But the choice of Afro-Arab tribes, with another reference past our reading, has another level of meaning. These are the descendents of Abraham with Hagar and Keturah (Genesis 25:1–4, 12–13), the people Abraham sent away so that Isaac’s descendents could be blessed. In this vision of light to overcome darkness, a vision of hope that overcomes despair, those who have been cast out are welcomed back by God.

It is a message that aligns with the reading from Ephesians where the Apostle Paul says he has been called to share the Good News with the Gentiles, those previously left out of God’s concern, at least in the people’s understanding. The goal is to allow everyone — Paul’s word — *everyone* to see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.

It is a message that also aligns with the reading from Matthew. The Magi come as representatives of the Gentile world, the world previously thought to be beyond God’s concern. Not only are they included in the stories of Jesus’ birth, signaling with their worship of the Christ-child a broader purpose for this Messiah right from the beginning; God has already spoken to them in ways outside of the customary box of tradition — through a star in the sky and their processes of discernment.

There are specific implications that come from a first reading of these texts — tribes left out are now included in this light of hope, the

Gentiles are included in the Gospel, all who worship the Christ are welcome in God's eternal realm. But there is also a broader trajectory of meaning here. While the human tendency is to draw smaller and small circles of inclusion, the Divine intent is to take in more and more people in each new generation, each period of revelation, until everyone is included. Therein lies the nature of true light.

What might this mean for us today? Whoever has been left out is included in God's love. The hungry and homeless, the immigrant and refugee, the outsider to our faith and culture, the outcast and abandoned, the prisoner, the person whose very identity seems an affront to some — whoever has been left out is included. The light of God's love has shined in the darkness and, as the Gospel of John says, the darkness has not and cannot overcome it.

But the good news of Epiphany is not just that God's light has shined. It is that light continues to shine through us. "Arise, shine; for your light has come," Isaiah says to the nation. The people are not just recipients of light, they are bearers of light, those called to live in such a way that attracts others to God, as a light to the nations. The Magi will bear such light when they return home. The Apostle Paul bears such light for the Gentiles. Such is our calling today.

When I think of bearing light, I think of people like Desmond Tutu who died this week at the age of 90. It's partly because he had such a bright and uplifting spirit, even while addressing the most tragic realities. He seemed like a cherub, always in but not quite of this world. But it's also because of his courageous stance against Apartheid and then his equal pursuit of healing and reconciliation. I cannot think of anyone who has led a more Christ-like life in our time.

Yet not everyone who bears the light does so in such a well-recognized way. In a recent *Christian Century* article, Episcopal vicar Laurel Mathewson describes some light bearers at a fledgling church in San Diego that is just trying to survive yet has an amazing witness of love. Much of the work is mundane, as the few remaining members do whatever is required to keep the church open — clean bathrooms, make tea for socials, prepare rooms for support groups. But as one member

put it, “We just had to keep the light going. We couldn’t let it go out on our watch.” And because they didn’t let it go out, people in need continue to find support, community, healing and love.

In like manner, there are many things we do to keep the light going. Some of this involves a clothing ministry and a food truck, hosting Family Promise and a blood drive, providing space for support groups. Some of this involves caring for each other in times of need or serving on committees that seem to do routine work, yet work that is needed to keep things going — looking after the buildings, seeing that bills are paid. And some of this involves our daily lives — simple acts of kindness, a willingness to listen, recognizing a need and responding. But in many different ways, we keep the light going. We don’t want to let it go out on our watch.

U2’s song *There Is a Light*, like much of the band’s work, explores a deeply spiritual issue. Bono describes his response to a brush with mortality, the questions of faith raised by a near-death experience. But in many ways the song also expresses the message of Epiphany.

And if the terrors of the night
come creeping into your days
And the world comes, stealing children from your room
Guard your innocence
From hallucination
and know that darkness always gathers around the light

There is a light you can’t always see
If there is a world we can’t always be
If there is a dark that we shouldn’t doubt
And there is a light, don’t let it go out

There is no reference to Magi, and the word Epiphany is not used, but the song assumes that darkness exists; it asserts that there is, nonetheless, light; and it pleads with the hearer to keep it burning. That is the message of Epiphany, a message we still need to hear.