

The Light of Christ

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Epiphany
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Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

"[T]his grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ." -- Ephesians 3:8

One of my duties as the assistant minister in St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh was to preside at the 8 a.m. communion services on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday mornings. And I always lived in fear that I would sleep through one of those services.

As it happened, I had to make a trip back to the U.S. one June, and I returned to the U.K. on an overnight flight on a Wednesday evening that put me back in Edinburgh about 9 a.m. on Thursday morning. Since I can't sleep on airplanes, I was exhausted and went right to bed, setting the alarm for 7 a.m. for the next morning's 8 a.m. communion service.

At some point, I awoke and looked at the clock, and to my horror it said 8:10. A pale light was streaming through the bedroom curtains, and I thought I'd lived to see my fear of missing a service realized. I leaped from the bed, threw on the nearest clothes I could find, and dashed out the door of my flat and headed up the High Street toward St. Giles', hoping that the people who'd shown up for the service hadn't left yet.

As I was jogging up the hill, I noticed that the light outside was peculiarly pale. I was too distracted with wondering what my boss would do to me to pay much attention and assumed the day was overcast, as many are in Edinburgh. When I got to the Cathedral about five minutes later, no one was waiting outside, and my heart sank; everyone must've gone home.

I unlocked the main doors and hurried to my office and phoned the home of the communion steward assigned for that day to apologize. His wife answered and I asked to speak to him. He wasn't in, so I assumed he hadn't made it home yet from the cathedral. I asked his wife to convey my apologies to him. She asked what for, and I said for missing the communion service. She asked what communion service, and I said Friday morning's. She said which Friday morning's, and I said this Friday morning's. She said, "How could you have missed it? It's Thursday evening," and that's when I realized that the light in that part of the world at that time of year can be confusing.

Today is Epiphany, a Christian celebration focused on the light that led to and comes from and is Jesus Christ. That light can be and, to most people, is hopelessly confusing and perplexing. The light that is Jesus Christ shows us that

in order to live to God we have to die to ourselves. It shows us that we have to lose ourselves in order to find ourselves. It shows us that we must love those who hate, including those who hate us and those who would inflict great harm.

When, during the Easter Vigil, we lift the Christ candle and sing, "Christ our light," we mean all of that and a great deal more. The light of Jesus Christ is no ordinary light.

We Christians believe that today, Epiphany, is when the light of God's Chosen One dawned on the entire world. That's what that much-loved story of the wise men is about. The story of the star leading to a baby is about the appearance of some kind of brilliant, peculiar, penetrating divine light that illumines the depths of reality and not just its surface.

The surface is where an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth makes us all equal – that is, equally blind and equally toothless, as Gandhi or King or someone has observed.

The surface is where a despot, threatened by news of a royal birth, murders babies in a vain attempt to kill holy love.

The surface is where people believe and say, "God approves of the lifestyle of me and my people and not of the lifestyle of you and yours."

There is much surface thinking in our world, and there always has been.

And so the appearance of a star, for the wise, is a cause for rejoicing, for it lifts us – again, if we are wise – from the plane of surface thinking and surface living, and gives us at least the chance to live in the heights and depths where God more fully dwells.

We know that the universe has at least three dimensions, probably more, and to live on the plane of only one or two of those dimensions is to miss out on a great deal of living.

And thus it is that Paul can say, with great joy, that God's grace led him, like a star, to bring to the Gentiles – that's us -- "the boundless riches of Christ."

That's ironic language about a man who embraced voluntary poverty as his way of life. To speak of boundless riches would be, to most of us, ironic language for a man who never traveled more than a hundred miles from his birthplace. To speak of someone as boundlessly rich would appear ironic language for a person who was born in a manger and crucified as a political criminal, deserted by his followers. In such a life, Paul says, there are boundless riches to be enjoyed by those with the wisdom to discern it and the courage to take it up.

We who call ourselves Christian are supposed to be those who have taken the way of Jesus the Chosen One as our way of life. We celebrate, on Epiphany, what the light of Jesus the Christ reveals to us Gentiles, to us outsiders, to us who are part of God's Plan B. We who call ourselves Christian have been graced with riches, if Paul is to be believed, and I, for one, believe him.

And so my question this morning is what are we doing with ours? Or even more fundamental, have we opened the doors of our minds and hearts to see the beams of Bethlehem's star? Are we as wise as those star-gazers from the east, who fixed their gaze on the lights that come from heaven?

Only you can answer that question for yourself and only we can answer it for ourselves as a church and as a people. And both the asking and the

answering will take patience, grace, and time. So let me close this meditation on the meaning of Epiphany with an image from recent church history.

It is said that when Pope John XXIII made the decision to convene the Second Vatican Council in 1959, he illustrated what he hoped the council would accomplish by going to a window in the papal apartment and flinging open a set of shutters so that the bright Italian sun and the warm Italian breeze could freshen the room. It was time, the pope said then and frequently thereafter, to open the windows of the church to let in some fresh air.

Light and air, friends, come from without, not from within, and the revivifying breath of the Holy Spirit is waiting to breathe on all of us, just as the light from Bethlehem's star continues to shine on all of us.

God is waiting for us to open our shuttered lives – lives shuttered by fear, by resentment, by confusion, by self-concern – and let the light shine in and then out.

Stop resisting, stop getting in the way, stop obscuring, and let the Holy Spirit do its work. You'll be dazzled by the results.