



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Hope of Epiphany

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 3, 2021
The Feast of the Epiphany
Based on Matthew 2:1-12*

Guide us, Lord, that we may be true to You and follow in Your path; let us be one in heart with all who revere Your name (Psalm 89:11). Amen.

On this first Sunday of 2021, most likely the routine of our daily lives has stayed consistent since we closed the chapter on 2020 three days ago. We are still encountering the same joys and challenges, the same worries and questions. What has changed?

Well, we know that *a lot* has changed. The year 2020 hit us with a force akin to an explosion, and we are still reeling from the impact. Change has certainly come, and we've crossed into new frontiers that will require more courage, more risk, and more love than ever before. In some ways we will want to return to the old country: oh, how I do miss giving and receiving hugs!

But in other ways, we absolutely cannot afford to return to what had already been killing us, even before the death toll started to rise from the pandemic—systemic racism, economic inequity, the plight of climate change; the discrimination embedded in our healthcare system, our political rancor, our lack of kindness and generosity. It is imperative that we continue to make our way into new territory where every person (and the planet!) is fully recognized for their inherent divine worth and dignity, created by God and in God's image. The year 2020 was a revelation, for it uncovered the ways we respond to crisis—how we rise to the occasion and hold our own, as well as how we wrestle with our vulnerability in the face of trial and struggle.

John's Gospel from last week showed us another revelation—the revelation of the hope of Jesus. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” It's interesting to note what John does NOT say. He does not say that Jesus' arrival did away with the darkness. It was still there. It was still pervasive. And it is still pervasive now as we make our way into this new and uncertain year and into new territory.

The shining of the light appears once more today as we commemorate the Feast of the Epiphany—the revelation and unveiling of the Messiah to the Gentile world in the visit of the Magi to the Christ child. Epiphany concludes the twelve days of the Christmas season and will officially be observed on the church's liturgical calendar this Wednesday, January 6. But here at St. Bart's, we like to be ahead of the curve!

Walter Brueggemann in his prayer/poem titled “Epiphany” writes:

On Epiphany day,
we are still the people walking.
We are still people in the dark,
and the darkness looms large around us,
beset as we are by fear,
 anxiety,
 brutality,
 violence,
 loss —
a dozen alienations that we cannot manage.

We are—we could be—people of your light.
So we pray for the light of your glorious presence
 as we wait for your appearing;
we pray for the light of your wondrous grace
 as we exhaust our coping capacity;
we pray for your gift of newness that
 will override our weariness;
we pray that we may see and know and hear and trust
 in your good rule.¹

The Magi—those wise men from the East—had that same prayer, that they would see and know and hear and trust in the good rule of the Messiah they had come to worship. They stride into Jerusalem and boldly and confidently ask, "Where's the baby king?" They seem almost oblivious to the terror that their question stirs up in Herod, the king that was currently enthroned. But the wise men are attentive and focused and trained in the art of observation. As scientists or astronomers, they may have begun their journey being starstruck, but they were aware of the evil and hatred that threatened and surrounded them and the child for whom they searched.

Herod's desire for secrecy would have confirmed their dawning suspicions of his ulterior motives. And if any doubt lingered, the Magi were even warned in a dream not to return to King Herod with any intel, although the king had requested it.

Epiphany is the season of revealing, of God reaching out to all humankind and humankind responding to God's initiative. God's great reveal of Jesus pushes us beyond boundaries of privilege, wealth, power, or race. The Christ child was born in humble circumstances, among an oppressed people, and not among the learned and affluent. His first witnesses are the working poor shepherds, the domestic animals, and now the Magi, spiritual pilgrims from a foreign land. In telling this story, Matthew, the Jewish Gospel writer, imparts the understanding of the importance of the Magi's visit, for it signified that Gentiles were also included in the birth of the Messiah. Their visit is a poignant reminder that Jesus welcomes all peoples from all places.

The Magi symbolize God's promise found in the book of Genesis, a promise given through Abraham that "all peoples on earth" would be blessed (Genesis 12:3), and it also embodies John's vision of heaven in the book of Revelation, depicting those from "every nation, tribe, people, and language" standing before the throne of Christ (Revelation 7:9). From Genesis to Revelation, that promise of hope is affirmed in the Magi's visit.

When their search for the infant king ended and they offered their worship and gifts, it could have been easy for the Magi to suppose that their work was done. But their work wasn't done. They were now to become bearers of the hope that they had witnessed first-hand.

I think the Magi told the story of that wondrous meeting of the Christ child again and again. I think they told it to one another, to those who weren't there, to their children and grandchildren, and even to those who may have laughed and called their tale an idle one. I think that story embedded itself so deeply into their psyche that it shaped everything they did from that moment on. Coming face-to-face with the Christ child must have changed everything, causing them to be forever on the lookout for Jesus.

I think that seldom a day passed when their noble faces didn't betray a small hint of a smile as they stole a moment to look off into the distance, knowing that, somewhere, out there, Jesus—the hope of all the world—was growing up and getting ready. That Jesus was learning, doing, and already influencing creation's course. Jesus represented hope to them. Hope grounded in the conviction that no matter how strong evil appears to be, it will eventually crumble. It is a hope that is sure and certain; a hope that makes fear and anxiety shudder. It is the confident affirmation that God is faithful to complete what God has begun. It is a hope that enables us to ardently pray, in the words of Brueggemann, that we will see and know and hear and trust in Christ's good rule.

And this hope becomes ours as well. As we find ourselves in the infancy of this new year, the Feast of the Epiphany deepens our understanding of the greatest event of all humanity: God entering our world, not just for a day's visit, but making it a permanent dwelling place. A God who lives among us, in our country, our city, our neighborhoods.

We are all being changed by this, because this same God lives within us in the form of the Holy Spirit. Even as we continue to confront the menace of this virus, our myriad fears, challenges and troubles, can we dare to grasp onto and live into the steadfast hope that only Christ can give?

N.T. Wright in his book titled *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath*, observes:

“So often, when people look out on the world and its disasters, they wonder why God doesn't just march in and take over. Why, they ask, does [God] permit it? Why doesn't [God] send a thunderbolt...and put things right? The answer is that God does send thunderbolts—human ones. [God] sends in the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the hungry-for-justice people. *They* are the way God wants to act in [God's] world. *They* are more effective than any lightning flashes or actual thunderbolts. *They* will use their initiative; *they* will see where the real needs are, and go and meet them. They will weep at the tombs of their friends. At the tombs of their enemies... There will be problems, punishments, setbacks, shipwrecks, but God's purpose will come through.

“These people—us!—prayerful, humble, faithful, will be the answer, not to the question *Why?* but to the question *What?* What needs to be done here? Who is most at risk? How can we help?”²

You see, God is working in and through and around us in ways that are bigger than we know. Though our lives may be in flux, we can be led into this new year with our eyes fixed on Jesus—the one who remains the same yesterday, today and forever. We can fix our hearts on hope and stand in those places where hope takes the risk to show its face, which is everywhere there is a beating heart. We can embody the spirit of the Magi and keep our eyes and our hearts peeled for signs of hope and follow where it leads. Indeed, to make the journey into new and beckoning territory where the love of Christ reigns. And to bear that gift of love to all whom we encounter. It is a journey that will require from us more courage, more risk, and more love than ever before. For the story continues.

Let us pray: Lord, you have gifted the Church through the goodness of your grace and love to be your hands and do your work, to be your voice and share your words. You have gifted your people with the blessings of your Spirit, the power to transform lives and make all things new. In this Epiphany season and as we enter this new year, be our daily star; and may our hearts receive, our mouths proclaim, and our hands be ready for service, that the hope we have from you might overflow into the lives we live, and pour into the hearts of others. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

1. *Prayers for a Privileged People* by Walter Brueggemann (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), p. 163.

2. *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* by N.T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), p. 34.

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