

Light from an Invisible Lamp

Isaiah 60:1-5, 19-20; John 1:1-9; Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany (Jan. 6), 2019

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*Stay away from anything/ that obscures the place it is in... /There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places/ and desecrated places.*

Wendell Berry

As you know, my favorite abiding place is my porch (which I remind you, that you built some twelve years ago). I sit there and watch the birds and the squirrels. Late in the day, as evening comes and the shadows lengthen, I love to watch the sunlight hit the tops of the pine trees in the distance. And I particularly love to sit on the porch on clear evenings when there is a full moon. Sometimes I watch the moonrise or other times it is already high enough that I cannot see it directly. But what I can see is the whole backyard and all the trees aglow with the radiance of the moonlight. On a clear night it is so bright that the trees cast shadows. I'll go out in the middle of the yard, look up at the stars and the moon, bask in their radiance and say, "Amen and amen."

I wonder if that was how it was for the Wise Men following the star. Scholars think it was a comet but whatever it was it was bright enough to follow. It was bright enough that the Wise Men, the Magi, knew something special was going on. Something extraordinary of cosmic importance was going on for this light to break into the dark world. It was bright enough to light up the whole countryside with its radiance.

Someone wrote a letter to J.R.R. Tolkien once about his book, *The Lord of the Rings*, saying, “you create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp” (see *Tolkien’s Sacramental Vision* by Craig Bernthal, p. 10).

I love that phrase, “light from an invisible lamp.” Like me on my porch basking in the radiance of the moonlight without me seeing the moon. The whole countryside was aglow.

Now, in the case of the Wise Men, they knew the light was coming from the Star but they knew that the star pointed to something beyond themselves that was of immense significance. As they did their research and made the connections, they realized that maybe this star was an authentic tiding of the Messiah of God. The Star, and its light, was pointing to something larger, beyond. As John wrote, “The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world” (John 1:9).

Remember that it was not uncommon in the ancient world to believe that the stars in the night sky were pinpricks in the heavens, allowing the light from beyond to shine through. All light, the stars, the moon, and even the sun in daylight, were portals, doorways, through which light from beyond shown.

The Wise Men went to Jerusalem, which some prophecies said would be the birthplace of the Messiah. But after studying Scripture more thoroughly the scribes in Jerusalem pointed the Wise Men toward little Bethlehem nine miles away. Of course, in Bethlehem they found the child, the Messiah, with Mary and Joseph. And these Wise Men knelt in worship, and offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Today is the Feast of Epiphany, when Christians all over the world are celebrating the Wise Men story. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning showing or manifestation or showing forth. The light of the star shows forth and points to something beyond itself of great importance. And for these next several weeks we will be reading Scriptures that tell of God showing forth or of someone seeing something of God. Epiphany is about light and how the light of God shows us who God is, and how we're able to see more of who God is and what God is doing by way of the light.

Again, as John wrote, "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" (John 1:3-5).

It is why the climax of the Sundays after Epiphany, right before we begin Lent, is Transfiguration Sunday, when we celebrate and read the story of Jesus on the mountaintop when he is transfigured, light shines not upon him, but shines from within him. He is *the* Light, the source of all light.

And it is why so many of the old paintings show Jesus, whether as an infant or a child or an adult, radiating light.

This morning I encourage you to look for the light. Learn to see by the light. Practice looking for the light rather than allowing the darkness to dominate your vision. John tells us the darkness does not overcome the light – but we know that it surely tries.

Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "The subject of my fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 118).

The Wise Men saw how evil King Herod was, but right there in territory held largely by the devil, to use O'Connor's words, the Christ Child, the Light of God was born.

The light of the Star shone in two directions for the Wise Men: it shown down onto the world, but it also shown upward to God. The Star in this story does what stars are always meant to do: show us the glory of God. That's why they were created in the first place.

We believe that this world was created to show us the glory of God. Each and every one of us was created to show forth the glory of God. Every time we serve and love, are merciful and forgiving, every time we act for justice and peace, every time we participate in beauty, we become who we were created to be. When we remember who we're meant to be, created to be, and redeemed to be our lives point in two directions: we point to God and God's kingdom, and we point to our neighbors and this good Creation. We walk in the light of God.

At the same time, the darkness seeks to disfigure the transfiguration. It seeks to mar the beauty, dehumanize, destroy and diminish the goodness, and overcome the light.

Which is why, for example, in our care for creation and opposed the tarsands pipeline a few years ago. This creation is sacred and we do not want to see it

desecrated. We do not want to live in a world that is so disfigured that we can no longer see the light and the beauty of God around us and in and through each other.

We do not want to become people who live in darkness.

Dag Hammarskjöld said, years ago, “God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.”

Daily find ways to renew your sense of wonder. Listen to God, read the Psalms, sing a hymn, bask in the steady radiance. Do this first. Don’t start the day with social media or the New York Times or the Washington Post or CNN or MSNBC or NPR. Do those things after you’ve bathed in the beauty and radiance of the light of God.

Poet Mary Oliver writes in “Six Recognitions of our Lord” of moments of radiance and seeing creation in a new light. “Then,” she says, “I go back to ... my own house, my own life, which has now become brighter and simpler, somewhere I have never been before.”

After this story ends we don’t know what happened to the Wise Men. We know they outfoxed the old fox Herod and went home by another route. But I think the Wise Men went home and saw everything more brightly. They were never the same and everything around them was illumined by a steady radiance.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.