

Pastor Joe Polzin
Matthew 2:1-12
“Light in the Darkness”
Year B – The Epiphany of Our Lord (Observed)
January 10, 2021

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

The events of this past week, especially those in our nation’s capital, are to say the very least troubling. And I don’t know how you experienced them, but if you’re like me, you have about a dozen or more competing strains of thought going all at the same time regarding how you feel about it.

From a Christian’s point of view, we know that God is a God of order, and that the law and the right to enforce the law are given to governments for our own good and protection, and for the good and protection of society. So, any person who acts contrary to the law and instead introduces unnecessary chaos and violence, we as Christians denounce it. Christians are to be obedient citizens, standing up for what is good, caring for the weak and vulnerable, and speaking against any threat to peace, order, and liberty. That’s perhaps the first thought that I had.

My second thought was that while I was seeing the videos and images that were coming from our nation’s capital, which for a matter of hours looked like a war zone, I was certainly shocked to see it, but I can’t say that I was surprised. And I’m not surprised because this world is full of moments that show us the true devastation, the true darkness of human sin.

As people who are familiar with everything that has happened over the past year, not to mention everything that has happened throughout the course of human history, the events of this past week are simply one more example where the darkness of our human sin rears its ugly head. In our Old Testament Reading today, Isaiah says, “For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples” (60:2). Well, we all saw, and we’ve already seen, how dark things can get.

Perhaps it would help us today, on this Epiphany Sunday, for a few moments to step outside of what is going on in our world currently and consider the world we hear described in our Gospel Reading. Because for them, the world was pretty dark, too. And one of the darkest figures of all is ready to take center stage.

Matthew writes, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, saying ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him’. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (2:1-3).

Although Herod is known in history as Herod the Great, he was anything but. He lived in the Jerusalem, appointed king over all Judea by the Roman government in 40 BC. He was ethnically an Arab by descent, but to appease his subjects, paid lip-service to the Jewish faith, but was never known for being particularly faithful.

He was paranoid and lethal. He had Roman soldiers and secret police and some think about 2,000 personal bodyguards. He killed members of his own family in order to protect his power. He tried to make his name great through impressive building projects, including the magnificent Temple Mount, some of which still stands today, but instead he made his name infamous by his harsh and deadly reign.

And we see Herod’s dark intentions with the magi when they appeared. They came to Herod to worship the newborn king of the Jews, ignorant of who or where he might be. They chose to go to Jerusalem, of course, supposing a king to be there. But this was the first Herod had

heard of it. And it didn't take long for Herod's troubled mind to come up with a plan to eliminate this particular threat. "Go and search diligently for the child," he said, "and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him" (2:9).

Of course, when the magi were warned by God in a dream, they never did, returning "to their own country by another way" (2:12). And Herod, when he realized that he had been tricked by the magi, "became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old and under" (2:16). Meanwhile, Joseph and Mary, who were also warned by the Lord in a dream, were fleeing to Egypt to keep Jesus safe from the evil and dark intentions of an evil and dark king.

The darkness of this world, the darkness of sin, and the darkness of our own sinful hearts have been evident for a very long time. So, in a way, there is truly nothing new under the sun. And that's why I say I'm not surprised by the events we saw on the news this past week, or year, or however long you want to look. Saddened, but not surprised.

And before we join in the national pastime of figuring out who's to blame and who's more righteous than whom, I think a more faithful response for Christians is to take this time to examine the log in our own eye before we point out the speck in anyone else's. After all, while we may not have rioted or protested any time recently, Scripture says we have all rebelled.

According to our sinful nature, we are "alienated and hostile" to God, doing nothing but "evil deeds," as Colossians says (1:21). Our old sinful selves are "ungodly," Romans says (5:6) and "enemies" of God (5:10). In our sin we are hostile to God, apathetic, and rebellious.

And to see such darkness play out in our world today, it should drive each and every one of us not to a "holier-than-thou" attitude, but instead back to God in both humility and repentance for our own sin and for our own complicity in such darkness. Even if my sin is not what everyone sees on national news, it is in my heart, and it's known to me and it's known to God.

And when we recognize this painful truth about ourselves, then we are truly ready to hear the good news that God has for us today. The good news of Epiphany. You remember what epiphany means, right? "Revelation"? God is revealing the light of his Son to a world that had been shrouded in darkness. Again, Isaiah said, "Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (60:2).

The Lord did arise, but he came as a child, born in Bethlehem. And then who do we see come to his light? Our Bibles call them "wise men," but that's a bit of a misnomer. The actual word in Greek is *magi*, as in magician. Sorcerer. Dark arts practitioner. Not necessarily even kings, as the Christmas carol goes.

Yes, these magi may have accumulated a lot of worldly wisdom, but ask any Jew from the first century to describe these visitors, and you would not hear them use the word "wise." They were Gentiles, and not only Gentiles, but the worst kind. They were *magi*. They represented all the darkness a pagan world, a world without God, had to offer.

And yet, the miracle of Epiphany was that, in the wisdom of God, this was who he led by a star and brought to faithfully worship the true King of Israel. Not Herod, mind you. But the true King, the Savior, Jesus Christ, who was maybe only a couple months or a couple years old. They didn't know what to expect. They didn't even know the right town to go to. But what God had in store for them was more than they could have ever have imagined in their wildest dreams. The true Light of the World, revealed personally to each and every one of them.

And this miracle of Epiphany should bring us great joy and great comfort today. Because we realize the darkness of sin that resides in our hearts and in our minds has been overcome by this same light from God. That the Light of Jesus Christ has been revealed not only to some of

the world, but to all. That his glory is for all people, including us. That the bright light of the forgiveness of sins won on the dark cross of Calvary, but then victoriously proclaimed from the empty tomb of Easter morning, that light has now been poured into our hearts.

The good news of Epiphany is that our God is willing and able to work the brightest of moments in the darkest of times and in the darkest of people. We see him do it in days of Herod the king. We see him do it for the magi. We see him do it in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And we see him do it in our lives, as well.

The Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (4:6). You have been given this light, the good news that Jesus died for your sins and rose for your eternal life.

So, then, what does this mean? Well, for starters, it means we are no longer subject to the despair of the darkness, the darkness of this world, and of the devil, and of our own sin. Colossians states, “We give thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:12-14).

When we find ourselves wracked with worry, fear, doubt, or guilt, we are no longer captive to these things. We turn to God and are reminded that these things do not control us. We are part of his Son’s kingdom now. We are children of the light, not of the darkness. He has forgiven us our sins, and shines the bright light of salvation for us.

The second thing this means is that since we have been given such a precious gift as Jesus, we now walk in the light, not in darkness (1 Thess. 5:5, 1 John 1:7). And that means we allow this light that God has given to us to shine through us to others who may still be in darkness. Because we have this light from God, we live differently than those around us. We love and serve our neighbor, not because we stand to gain something, but because we are the ones who have been loved and served by God. Through our words and through our actions, others may come to know the love and light of Jesus Christ.

And third, since we do still live in this world until the day Jesus comes again, we live not according to the despair of darkness, but according to the light of the hope we have in him. We, as Christians, know this world is *not* all there is. If it were, we have nothing to look forward to. But instead, we are looking forward to the day when Jesus will return, and raise us from the dead, and restore all creation for us to live with him. Our hope is in the new heavens and the new earth. Which allows us to endure our lives in the current earth.

We certainly have to endure many things, many difficulties, many hardships. We will witness many times over the darkness of this world, and even the darkness of our own sin, because we are not yet perfect. But because Christ has come, and because Christ will come again, we do not lose hope.

Christians cannot wait to see the glory of the Lord that Isaiah once foretold, that Mary and Joseph and the shepherds saw in that manger, that the magi saw with their own eyes. We, too, will see the glory of the Lord on that day, as we will see Jesus face-to-face, where there will be no more darkness, only unimaginable light. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. **Amen.**