FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY - Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12 - 6 January 2019 - A sermon given by The Rev. Peter A. Munson for the people of St. Ambrose Episcopal Church, Boulder, Colorado

*A Church That Is Light in the Darkness*

INTRODUCTION - Epiphany

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany, when we commemorate the Son of God being made manifest to the Gentiles in the form of the visit of the wise men, the magi, or, as Eugene Peterson calls them, “a band of scholars.” (See *The Message*, by Eugene H. Peterson) According to our Gospel today, their testimony was that they observed a star at its rising - “his star” - a star that appeared, as they understood it, to herald the brith of the king of the Jews.

“Epiphany” means a revealing, a manifestation of something, a showing, a breakthrough of some sort. I like to think of it as “the light bulb clicking on”, that instance when any one of us has that “aha” moment when we suddenly get something…something important. The importance here? In fulfillment of prophecies, One had been born who would be light for all the nations. Isaiah 60 is a good example of one of those prophecies. “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” (Isaiah 60:1-3)

SITUATION - A story about this church

I have a story to share with you about this church being a light in the darkness. Here is the background:

On Wednesday we were having our first staff meeting of the new year, our “Let’s get back at it” staff meeting. At one point, Jill Jenkins, our bookkeeper, brought up a very appropriate bookkeeper-type question, a question about the status of our 2019 mission budget. We have a huge gap at the moment, folks. That’s the truth. Perhaps it’s related to this being a year of transition. Perhaps it’s partly related to losing some faithful members who have moved away. It’s also related to still having a number of folks who haven’t pledged for 2019. In any event, we are $50,000 behind in having a fully-funded mission, one without any frills, by the way. We were discussing all this, including strategies coming out of the last Vestry meeting, the need to pray, etc. Not too long after our discussion, the staff meeting ended and I took a phone call. When I got off the phone, I overheard Kristy talking on her office line and saying something like, “I’ll have Peter call you as soon as he gets off the phone.” I wandered over, she handed me her quickly-written notes. There were people’s names and “father-in-law suffered stroke” and “off life support” and “Good Sam, Lafayette”. I got on the phone and was talking to the daughter-in-law of the man who had suffered the stroke. It turned out that Bill and Vicky had been visiting their son and daughter-in-law for Christmas, when Bill suffered a massage hemorrhage on December 24. Now it was January 2, and his wife and the rest of the family had made the decision to take him off of life support. The chaplain at Good Samaritan had given them the name of St. Ambrose, as Bill and Vicky belong to an Episcopal Church in North Carolina. Could I come over? The daughter-in-law, Jessica, said, “I have a question. I’m Catholic. Does the Episcopal Church have something like Last Rites? Can you come over and offer those prayers, before we take Bill off of life support?” Yes we do and yes I can, I replied.

And so within a half-hour of that phone call I was in the ICU of Good Samaritan Hospital, meeting Bill’s wife, three of Bill’s siblings who had flown in from out of state, meeting Bill’s son and daughter-in-law, meeting Bill, too.

Not the circumstances under which I like to meet anyone for the first time! But for a family whose Christmas had been thrown into darkness - one of the brothers told me, “we were all together just two weeks ago and he was fine” - I clearly felt the Lord’s hand in all of it.

I led the Ministration At Time of Death liturgy from the Prayer Book - Last Rites - anointed Bill with holy oil, reminded Bill that Jesus was waiting for him on the other side, invited family members to say their particular goodbyes to Bill, which they did. After a time, Bill’s wife went to the nurse and told her that they could begin taking Bill off of life support. I had a few more communications with the family, and then I came back here, to St. Ambrose.

WHAT IS A CHURCH?

What is a church? Well, I’m sure we could give a lot of answers to that question, starting with the Body of Christ and therefore the hands and feet of Christ in the world. But related to all of that, there is this idea of being a light in the darkness. A church does not exist just for its members, and so St. Ambrose doesn’t either. A church exists to proclaim and to point to Jesus, to the working of the Spirit, to the grace and goodness of God - and to reflect God’s light. In reflecting God’s light, in being a channel for sharing the light of Christ that is within us (as Becky Fredregill put it on Thursday), then we bring peace, love, light, and healing to the world.

St. Ambrose is here for all of you, and also for all the people like Bill and Vicky who have something unforeseen and even horrible happen when they are out of town, and they need someone to turn to. St. Ambrose is here for the people who drive into our parking lot, desperately looking for some money to help pay the rent, so that they are not evicted. St. Ambrose is here for neighbors who need a place to sort our family tragedy, and for neighbors who wish to get married. St. Ambrose is here for a whole slew of women who are surrendering their lives to God and to each other as they make their way back from all the repercussions of being addicted to alcohol. St. Ambrose is here for children who have been abused and neglected in El Salvador, and who have found a lifeline in the form of a few local women and one pastor - some of whom are not from El Salvador - who offer them love, affirmation, and education, and an opportunity to trust in the saving and transformative power of Christ.

St. Ambrose is here to welcome people who have forgotten how to sing with others and want to do that again, for those who have forgotten how to pray, and for those who never learned how to pray, and want to learn! St. Ambrose is here for the very youngest and the very oldest among us, for the married, the single, and the divorced, for the the straight, the gay, and the transgender among us, for black, white, and brown, for all who seek God and a deeper relationship with Christ.

We are not here just for ourselves. Perhaps you came years ago and felt welcome; you found your light in the darkness, which is centered on the Light of Christ - loving us, guiding us, and working through us for good.

COMPLICATION - Threats are all around us

If you know the rest of today’s Gospel story, you know that Herod didn’t want to learn where Jesus was born so that he could pay him homage. He wanted to learn where Jesus was so that he could kill him. And so it was that - after an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, to warn him - the Holy Family fled to Egypt for a while, to find a place to live until it was safe to return to Israel. Do we forget that the Holy Family were migrants, refugees looking for someone who would offer them the light and love of God? Who were the people who were light for the Holy Family? We don’t know those details of the story, but we do know that such people existed, and that God continued to watch out for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

We are reminded that there are always threats in the world, people bent on carrying out violence and destruction. A super-high majority of the world is not in that category, but some have succumbed to the Tempter’s ways. Not only that, in this world where the Kingdom of God has not yet been fully realized, bad things happen. People suffer massive strokes when they are out of town. Others get an illness, can’t work for a time, get behind on their rent, and find themselves homeless - with children. Others suffer other kinds of losses and don’t have any family that they can rely on.

They need to find light in the darkness. They need a community… they need a church… they need other people who have experienced the saving grace of God’s light and love… they need people to lean on for a time, people who have received God’s love in such a way that they know the only possible response they can have is to try to pass that love on - in some way.

GOOD NEWS

The good news is that the Light of God has come for all people and all nations, with healing in His wings. The good news, as Becky Fredregill recognized on Thursday, is that the Lord chooses unlikely people to make manifest His presence in the world, to reveal the kingship of the Christ. People like these wise men, this band of scholars. Yes, my friends, God even works through nerds to accomplish God’s purposes!

Here’s another piece of the good news that I am going to name today. You have a rising star, too. Since God is at work in you… since the Holy Spirit has been given to you… you have a star that is rising. Yes, God chooses the likes of you and me - teachers, scientists, engineers, programmers and IT whizzes, writers and administrative assistants and bookkeepers, nurses and therapists and moms and dads and uncles and aunts and grandpas and grandmas, and even a few clergy-types - to be a light in the darkness, to be the wise one and/or the loving one who shows up, just in the nick of time.

CONCLUSION

I honestly don’t know how the “budget gap” is going to be resolved between now and the Annual Meeting on January 27. I know this: We are in the mission field. Our Lord calls us to be faithful, to be light in the darkness, to offer love and healing in Jesus’ name. I know that St. Ambrose is meant to be here for a very long time. And I know that St. Ambrose is not a building. It is a community of people who are followers of Jesus Christ, who have a deep and abiding trust in the God who provides everything that we need. St. Ambrose is meant to be here for a long time because God has called us to be a light in the darkness, so that all kinds of people - including people who live in other countries! - can receive the light of Christ.

I know that you are going to continue being that reflection of Christ, that light in the darkness.

Thank you for that!