

January 6, 2019 (Epiphany)

TEXT: Matthew 1:18–2:15

TITLE: Darkness & Light

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

This morning is Epiphany Sunday—a special day associated with January 6th, the 12th day after Christmas, the date traditionally assigned to when the magi brought their gifts to the infant Christ Child. I would go so far as to say that it is only because of Matthew’s gospel that we even have Epiphany. Luke’s Christmas story is earth-bound—focusing on a young girl’s surprising pregnancy, a journey by donkey to Bethlehem for a national census, and a visit by local shepherds who learn of Jesus’ birth from angel messengers. But Matthew’s Christmas story is bigger, national if not universal in scope. In Matthew we have a tyrant on the throne, plotting the destruction of a possible rival; and we have astrologers from distant lands traveling long distances to pay homage to a humble child-king. Matthew’s story has details that are hard to comprehend, especially with our modern, skeptical mindsets: a child conceived by God’s Holy Spirit, a Savior of the world named Immanuel, God with us? What are we to do with this story—this revelation—this, in a word, epiphany?

To appreciate the miraculous nature of Christ’s birth long ago, it is helpful to consider the wondrous things happening today that we accept without question. For example, how many of you read of the recent success of the New Horizons space probe? Back in 2006, a year before Steve Jobs’ first iPhone came on the market, NASA launched a space probe that would fly past both Jupiter and Pluto. By incredible skill and good fortune, that probe is still going. This past week it passed by an object outside our solar system—a weird snowman-shaped space rock called Ultima Thule. It’s only 20 miles long and is literally shaped like a two-part snowman—two rocks that fused together and now orbit out in the Kuiper Belt past Pluto. Until this week, astronomers only had a few blurry pixels as their image of Ultima Thule, but now they can see it in amazing detail, thanks to the New Horizons probe.

Ultima Thule is over 4 billion miles from earth. I can’t begin to comprehend that magnitude of distance. As people of the space age, we know it’s possible to leave this planet and travel through the barren expanses of space. But what before had only been a speck of light—a space rock known only through blurry pixels in a telescope—now has been seen clearly. It has become manifest. It is a type of epiphany—that which was speculation before is now concrete, real to us.

This type of knowledge typically comes to us through our senses. That’s why we say things like: “Seeing is believing.” “I need to hear it with my own ears before I’ll believe.” Or remember Doubting Thomas who announced, “Unless I touch the mark of the nails in his hands, I will not believe Jesus has risen from the dead.”

But there are many things in life we accept without verification from our senses. We are moved by beauty; we can be giddy with joy or filled with love—yet we can barely put those experiences into words, much less scientifically quantify them. The truth is that

there is more to life than just what our eyes see, our ears hear, and our fingers touch. It is that reality to which Christmas points. It is that deeper truth which Matthew wants us to grasp and for which the church created today's celebration of Epiphany.

Here's how it works. Every one of us, seated in our pews, is a scientist and theologian at the same time—persons of logic and of faith. During this time of year, we hear the bible's Christmas stories about how God is active in our world. The stories announce this good news: *Unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* Whether you define God in very concrete terms, sort of like the God of the Sistine Chapel who moves on the clouds, or define God in more figurative terms, God as the spirit of life moving over the waters of creation—it is possible for scientists and theologians to affirm that God is at work in the world—in fact, at work in the universe. NASA scientists all work by faith. They believe that the same laws of space and time we experience here on earth hold true at the farthest limits of the galaxy. They have no direct proof of this; they accept it by faith. That's why in 2006 they programmed their space probe in the way they did. Scientists and theologians know that something wondrous holds this world together and by all appearances this “something” does so in order to preserve life. But the Christmas stories don't stop there.

Matthew demands that we go deeper. Matthew wants us to appreciate that the Christmas epiphany is life-changing, if not life-saving. When I read the gospel lesson for today, did you notice how many times in those verses something seriously bad was described—something that literally took angelic intervention to counter? Joseph found out his fiancé was pregnant and was going to divorce her—an action that risked serious public disgrace and possibly Mary's death by stoning. An angel had to come to him and tell him to carry through with their marriage. Then a tyrant on the throne became frightened when he heard of the birth of a rival, so he tried to trick foreign astrologers into becoming his spies of destruction. An angel had to warn the wise men not to return to Herod—and later appears a second time to Joseph and warned him to get his young family out of Bethlehem as soon as possible.

The big epiphany of the Christmas season is that God is at work in the world, holding together this universe. The more specific epiphany of Christmas is that God is active in our historic, earthly realm—aware of the government census that sent Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, active in the days of the Roman Empire when a miracle worker named Jesus walked on earth, died and was acclaimed to be raised from the dead. But if we really listen to what Matthew is describing for us today, the real epiphany of Christmas is that God has come to push back the things of darkness by the power of God's truth and light. For there is much darkness in this world—things that are contrary to God's will, God's order, God's hopes and dreams for us and all humanity. The wonder of Christmas is that God said, “Enough. The light has come into the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

That's why in Matthew's gospel the epiphany, the manifestation of light is first revealed in the angelic interventions in which evil is stopped, violence is thwarted, and life is affirmed. In that heaven-sent light, Joseph took Mary as his wife and protected her as

she gave birth to a son. In that light, Herod's plans of violent intrigue were hampered by the re-direction of the magi and the flight of the Holy Family. Yes, darkness still exists. Herod still decreed the execution of young boys in Bethlehem, even as his later successor—a king also named Herod—would support the crucifixion of the Messiah Jesus. But God's light came into the world to push back the shadows of darkness, and darkness can not—will not—ultimately prevail.

That is what Matthew wants us to take away from his epiphany story. Light, like a star, has shone around us—a child is born to whom we are to pay homage. A Savior has come who offers grace and truth and life. Whether we are here in Pittsburgh or somewhere out beyond Ultima Thule, God is active, engaged, and calling us to walk in the light of life now revealed on earth.

So how will we be changed because of this epiphany? Will we join God in the work of pushing back against darkness? Will we, like the magi, take a different route home? Will we travel a different path from this day onward—one of light and justice, refusing to acquiesce to the power of darkness? Will we see the act of gift-giving differently—modern magi laying our treasures in places that the world undervalues, but by God's grace can bring forth healing, hope, new life? Will we stop being surprised when strangers from afar—foreigners or migrants or whoever appears on our doorstep—and learn to see them as they are, brothers, sisters, siblings in one family of God's design and God's loving care? Will we think of distant planets, even tiny ones like Ultima Thule, and through images of their barrenness be compelled to take better care of this planet, this third rock from our sun, wonderfully able now to support life but only if we care for it as stewards of this creation?

It's Epiphany Sunday. Don't miss what is being revealed to you this day. Join with the God in Christ whose light has come to push back against all darkness.

AMEN