

## “Light”

Reading: Ephesians 3:2-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Light in a dark place is a welcome thing. Many of us traveled recently to celebrate Christmas and New Year's with family or friends, and maybe while you were staying in someone else's home you had the experience of waking up from a deep sleep in the middle of the night and not being awake enough to remember where you were. If it didn't happen over Christmas, I bet that's happened to you at some point in the past; it's just one of those tricks our brains play on us sometimes while it's waking up. I know that when I'm in those moments of confusion in an unfamiliar place during the deepest dark of the night, my senses start searching for something to hold onto, something to trigger a memory of where I am. Maybe it's a sound, like the ticking of a clock, but more often it's a light in the darkness: a streetlight shining through the window, a night light out in the hall, the glow from an alarm clock. Light in a dark place is a welcome thing. It gives you something to hold onto and lets you get your bearings. The tiniest glimmer in the darkest place is sometimes all you need.

It's surely because light is such a powerful force that is so needed in our lives that it is such a potent symbol in our stories and in our Scriptures. Jesus is called the Light of the World, and we all instinctively know what He means. During Advent, the light on our wreath grew with the passing of each week, not just because candles are festive and pretty to look at, but because it *shows* us the story that we hear with our ears and understand with our minds. We may not grasp all the theology and all the Scriptural messages about this Messiah, but we understand the Light. Light in a dark place is a welcome thing.

And that's why we have Epiphany in the church calendar. In the Western Church, you have four weeks of fasting during Advent followed by the feast of Christmas, which is followed by the continued celebration during the twelve days of Christmas, which ends with Epiphany. Many of our Christian celebrations are odd sorts of things; we celebrate odd stories and remember odd people who seem so out of place in our world today, and Epiphany is no exception. Usually, the story that is our focal point for Epiphany is the adoration of the Magi, the story we read in Matthew 2 of foreign dignitaries or wise men or astrologers coming to pay honor to the newborn Messiah. In art and in our nativities they're usually depicted as three kings, though we don't know how many of them there were and we don't know that they were kings. It's also pretty certain that they weren't there at the same time as the shepherds and the angels, and they didn't find Jesus lying in a manger; it's more likely that Jesus was a couple of years old at the time. But the point of their story, and the point that is demonstrated in our nativity scenes, is that Jesus' birth was accompanied by praise from angels and stars and shepherds and foreigners, while He was met with rejection and attempted murder from the leaders of His own nation.

But why does *this* story conclude the twelve days of Christmas in the Christian calendar? Sometimes we tell the story of the wise men on Christmas itself, or maybe during Advent. Why don't some of the other stories of Jesus' life form the bookend of Christmastide? Why is *this* story Epiphany?

Because it's a story of light breaking into a dark place, and Christmas is about the light breaking into our world, and Epiphany means *revelation*, the coming of sight and light to blind eyes.

It's because this odd story of foreign dignitaries and priceless gifts and mad old King Herod is a particularly meaningful story of this light of Christmas breaking into a particularly dark place. It is a seismic shift in salvation history, a key moment in God's timeline in which His plan moves forward dramatically. It was a long-awaited moment, one that had been foretold as part of the mission of the promised Messiah. We read about it in our call to worship from Isaiah 60: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and His glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

The promised Messiah was to do many things, but one of the most significant was to bring other nations into the light of God's love. God had been working for thousands of years with just one nation, Israel, with the intent being that their blessing would then bless others. Ultimately, God was not just reconciling them, He was reconciling the entire world, both Gentile and Jew. As is so often the case in God's economy, what seems insignificant to our eyes is anything but, and so these strange foreign travelers, few though they may be, represent the beginning of the nations coming to God's kingdom. Even as a toddler, the Messiah is fulfilling His mission.

Epiphany is the end of Christmastide because it is the next step in God's mission: the light came into the darkened world with the birth of the Messiah, and then those nations that live in the deep darkness begin to be drawn to the light with the journey of the Magi at Epiphany. We who are Gentiles by birth celebrate because it is God beginning the process of inviting *us* into His family. Light in a dark place is a welcome thing, especially when the dark is particularly deep. We would not know the love of Christ if He did not first love us. We would not know the beauty of the light if He did not draw us to Himself.

We must be careful, though, because light in a dark place is also a revealing thing. Dark is good for hiding and concealing, but the darkness gives up its secrets when the light arrives. That's just as true in the dark corners of your soul as it is in the dark corners of your house. Many of you know my dog Calvin and his long, soft, very black fur that sticks to everything and gets everywhere. Pastor Carey and I try to clean up his fur as well as we can, but the darkness hides things. Recently I moved our coffee table from out of the center of the room where it had been for several years, and you can guess what I found underneath: a perfect outline of the coffee table made out of Calvin hair. Once the light comes, it shows what the dark has been keeping out of sight.

And when the light of Christ breaks into the world, and the nations see the epiphany of His coming, the light reveals what is in the darkness. Herod, jealous of a potential threat to his authority when he hears about the birth of a new king, lashes out and orders the murder of all the infants in Bethlehem. Even the mention of the light reveals Herod's fear, his instability, his insecurity, his selfishness. What you are will be revealed in the light. No hidden dusty corners. The question then really becomes why we fear the revelation that the light brings. Why do we cling so tightly to the darkness, when light is the alternative? Why do we try to keep our dusty corners hidden, when the alternative is cleaning and health?

Light ought to be welcome in a dark place, and as we enter into this year by basking in the light of Christ's coming and His epiphany, we must ask ourselves how we will welcome that light. What dark corners are we protecting, and why? Let this be the year of bringing them into the light.

This story of Epiphany tells us that light in a dark place is also meant to be shared. As we have seen the beauty of the light of Christ in our own lives, we are called to share that beauty with those still in the darkness. The problem with basking in the light is that we might get too comfortable there and forget how dark the darkness is, and we might forget about those who are still living in that darkness. Again, our nativity scenes are a theological portrait, not a literal depiction, of the birth of Jesus. He is attended by shepherds, those on the humble margins of society, and angels, those who are sent by God and are living in the light of God, and foreign dignitaries, those least likely to come bearing royal gifts, but are nonetheless sensitive to the movement of God. Meanwhile, the religious folks who grew up hearing prophecies of the coming Messiah are nowhere to be found, while Herod, the reigning king of God's nation, plots murder. Those who should have been first in line to worship and share the light are instead either rejecting it or ignoring it.

But Epiphany doesn't let us do that. The nations coming to Christ remind us that the goal of God's mission was always to shine the light in the furthest, darkest places, not to stay confined and comfortable. These Magi from the East warn us that we'd better not thank God for shining His light into our lives, while also quietly thanking Him that we're not like *those people* still in the dark. Keeping the light to ourselves runs contrary to the point of Christmas. The inclusion of the nations, this expansion of the invitation to join God's family, has always been one of God's goals. This was one of the reasons Jesus came. As Paul says in our reading from Ephesians, the "mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." The work of Jesus was to reach out and embrace those who are far off, just like you and I were at one time.

Those wise men bringing gifts to baby Jesus increase the scope of the light of Jesus' birth. Epiphany expands the message of Christmas, so that the light has not only come into the darkness, the light is searching the darkness for more. Christmas is not just for us, it is also for others. And, in fact, it is for those who are least worthy. These wise men are surely decent men, but they are hardly the sort of people we would expect bringing gifts to Jesus. They're foreigners, alien to the promises of God and maybe even hostile to some of the goals of God's people. They're apparently astrologers of some sort, since they were searching the stars for signs related to world events. Astrology was condemned among God's people, just as it's foolish and ungodly today. Still, God chose to work through means they understood, and they responded. They didn't even know who they were looking for, or where they should be looking; they had to ask Herod for directions. And we know nothing else about them or what they did after they went home.

And yet God guides them, and they respond. The message of Epiphany is that the invitation to God's kingdom is far more inclusive than many people think. The message is that everyone regardless of race, background, language, skin color, family, ability, skills, education, economics, gender, and on and on, is invited into the family. And what's more, they are invited to be called and gifted for service in God's kingdom. The light does not depend on you, it depends on God: just come and be willing. You don't have to sneak in and sit in the corner; God has a call for you, and He has gifts for you to enable you in your mission and in your service.

This is the work God has always been about, bringing light to the dark places, bringing revelation. Creation itself begins with God's first recorded words: "Let there be light." And once He

has brought light, then He begins creating order and bringing form to the chaos. This is at the core of what God is still doing today. He opens blind eyes, unstops deaf ears, brings order to the chaos, gives law to the lawless, reveals what was hidden, brings the dark things into the light.

This is still what God is doing. This is what God wants to do this year in you, in me, in our church, and in our community. The light of Christmas is a welcome comfort, but it also reveals the truth about our souls, and it is not meant to be kept to ourselves. During this season of Epiphany, how is God calling you into the light?

Benediction from Isaiah 60: May the sun no more be your light by day, nor the brightness of the moon shine on you; may the Lord be your everlasting light, and your God be your glory.



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