

Come Into The Light – 1-5-20 – Pastor Donna Doult – Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

When I was a kid, every time a cartoon character had a great idea or a revelation, a light bulb would appear over their head. An epiphany is a light-bulb moment in which there is a sudden realization that leads to a new perspective that clarifies a problem or situation.

The word epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning “reveal” or “striking appearance.” Historically, the concept of epiphany evolved as a religious term and generally referred to insights that come from a divine source. Our Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Christ as the Son of God.

I remember in the 1982 movie, *Poltergeist*, an evil force emanated from the hissing family television console, whispering and coaxing to the youngest child Carol Anne, “Come into the light”. Like most of us, having the light on is a source of comfort and security, so little Carol Anne was lured into the light which turned out to be evil.

The gospel writer, Matthew, tells of the birth of Jesus in just 10 words in English, ‘*Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea*’. With this sentence he includes all that we read in Luke’s Gospel about. Luke is just a little more verbose about it

- the census ordered by Caesar Augustus,
- the trip of the heavily pregnant Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem,
- the lack of accommodation in Bethlehem,
- the birth of Jesus and being wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger,
- the events that took place in the fields near Bethlehem, the angels and their message that the Savior had been born,

- the shepherds who visited the new born child and the joy that filled their hearts as they returned to their flocks.

I'm sure Matthew would have been aware of all of these details but he summarizes them all in just a few words, '*Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea*'.

It's as if Matthew skips across the joy that the birth of this baby creates in heaven and on earth deliberately because he has something else on his mind. His very next words give us a hint. He tells us the birth of Jesus took place '*during the time when Herod was king*'. Remember Herod? We talked about him last week. He was the Biblical Grinch who tried to steal our Christmas!

It's a light-bulb moment for us, because we know...don't we?... that Jesus was born during the reign of one of Judea's blackest kings. History tells us that Herod the Great, as he is known, was a ruthless and evil king. He was appointed "king of Judea" by the Romans. The Jews didn't think much of him because he was only partly Jewish. The Romans, on the other hand, were suspicious of him because he was partly Jewish. And Herod, well, he was suspicious of everyone.

So you see when Matthew mentions the name of Herod at the beginning of his retelling of the Christmas story, he is suggesting something about how the story might unfold.

The first readers must have gasped when they heard that the wisemen from the East went to Jerusalem and consulted horrible Herod about where they might find the newborn king. They knew that Herod wouldn't greet this kind of news with any joy. He was paranoid and always fearful that he would lose his position and authority over Judea, so he would allow no-one to challenge his position – especially not a newborn prince who was fully Jewish and his kingship foretold in ancient Scriptures.

When the wise men went into the light, and found the baby boy, scripture says “they were filled with joy”. They had a...wait for it....an “EPIPHANY!” TAAAA-DAAAA! This is the long-awaited king!

But Herod was the poltergeist evil behind the light. These three guys weren't wise for nothing! They had been warned in a dream. They never went back to Jerusalem as Herod ordered, instead returning home on another route. They would not betray this new-born king.

We know what Herod did when the wise men didn't return to Jerusalem. He was ticked off, and sent his soldiers to Bethlehem and the surrounding district and had every baby boy 2 years of age and under killed. He had killed all opponents to get his throne and had no reservation in killing babies to keep it.

Fear, anger, jealousy, threats, violence, murder, and grieving parents seem to dominate the Christmas story in Matthew's Gospel. This is such a contrast to the story that Luke tells when there is such obvious joy, hope, and praise to God for the exciting news that a Savior has been born. Of course there is joy in Matthew's story as the wise men kneel before the Christ-child but it is set against the hatred and violence of Herod. Why would Matthew want to highlight so much evil on the occasion when so much good comes into the world?

Just as Luke tells us the poor conditions in which Jesus was born – the highly unsuitable delivery room, the manger bed, the swaddling clothes – Matthew tells us something about the world in which Jesus was born. He wasn't born when everything was sweet and cozy. Even at this early point in his life he was under threat and had to escape under the cover of night before Herod's soldiers arrived in Bethlehem. Matthew is emphasizing the theme

that is foretold in the ancient Scriptures – that the world was a dark place and that a light was coming.

Our Old Testament reading this morning says it all... "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

This theme of light driving away darkness is heralded by the star that shone brightly in the dark night sky as it led the wisemen from the East and eventually stopped over the place where Mary & Joseph and Jesus were staying. This bright light in the night sky hailed the birth of the Light of the world.

Jesus said this about himself, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness"* (John 8:12). Just as turning on a light in a dark room chases away all signs of darkness, Jesus is the light who has come into our world darkened by sin, evil, violence, hatred, cruelty and lovelessness. Jesus was born into our world to bring hope, forgiveness and peace, to drive out from our lives all hopelessness and fear.

The Light of Christ shines into the darkness of our lives.

- There is darkness in each of our lives – the darkness of sin - but for each of us the darkness in our lives is different. Only you can say in what way the darkness of sin and evil affect your life.
- The darkness may be the wrong that you have done and cannot accept that God has forgiven you – maybe you aren't able to forgive yourself.
- The darkness may be the coldness and the uncomfortable feeling that a breakdown in a relationship brings.
- The darkness in your life may be fear of what the future may bring because of illness, the loss of someone close, our own dying.

- Darkness is caused by a lack of light – there may be a lack of love, generosity, a forgiving spirit;
- a lack of tolerance, a willingness to co-operate or to give of your time to others.

The darkness in Herod's life had completely overwhelmed him. He could not see Jesus as the wise men did. In fact he was so filled with evil that he feared the light, in fact, saw the light as darkness – as a threat to his security and comfort. John comments on this when he says, *'People who do evil hate the light and won't come to the light, because it clearly shows what they have done'* (3:20).

What a contrast this is to the wise men. They followed a star and what did they find - a little boy. Looked like the son of a carpenter and a peasant girl! But they knelt before him, gave him precious gifts and worshipped this little boy, this child, this light for our lives, this light for all people in the world.

This is the first Sunday in 2020. 2019 is now part of history. Lots of bad things happened in 2019, but lots of good things too. The things that happened last year can't be changed. There are events that we wish would have turned out differently. There were times when our behavior left much to be desired. Things happened that we could not have predicted. Things happened in our personal lives that we would never have guessed would happen at the beginning of last year.

So we look at this year and the same holds true. But whatever this year brings, the challenge for us is to look for the light of Christ shining in our lives. And that's hardest to see when things don't seem to be working out.

Look for the light of Christ, recognize it and be guided by it. Be prepared, like these Wise men, to give gifts of worship.

Matthew's story of the wise men visiting the Christ-child tells us that Jesus was born into world of violence and wicked people. He is the light that has come to chase away the darkness.

In his light, we find the strength to carry on amid our moral and spiritual crises. He is the light that encourages us when darkness overwhelms us. Wherever there is darkness in our family, in our friendships, in our community, Christ has come to shed light on all those areas of our lives to restore peace and harmony and joy. Wherever there is darkness in our nation or in the world at large, Christ has commanded us to let our light shine before others, to use whatever means we have at our disposal to relieve the suffering of others and drive out the darkness that shrouds the lives of so many. Let the light of Christ shine through us so that the darkness of evil might be dispelled.

There is only one cure for the darkness of sin and unhappiness and that is the Light –Don't be afraid to go into the light...the Light of Jesus. Let him be your guiding light in the beginning of this new decade of 2020.

Amen.