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LIVING IN THE LIGHT

Matthew 2:1-12 Isaiah 60:1-6

Do you remember the Steven Spielberg motion picture *Hook*—with Robin William portraying Peter Pan, and Julia Roberts playing Tinkerbell? Dustin Hoffman portrayed Captain Hook. Hook pursues Peter Pan to repay him for “the crocodile incident” which cost him his hand and which resulted in Hook gaining his hook. In the midst of his plotting and ranting and raving, Hook suddenly has a momentary glimpse of the purpose of his life. He cautiously confides this to Smee, his loyal but bumbling first-mate.

“Smee! Smee! I’ve just had a sublime vision,” says Hook. “All the jagged parts of my life have come together to form a complete and mystical whole . . . An epiphany.”

“Epipha-what?” Smee mutters, and Hook goes on to explore the revelation. Later in the same scene, the impressionable Smee sets down a golden goblet that rings like a bell as it touches the table and he too has a moment of clarity. As a light goes on in his eyes, he tries to share Hook’s discernment of the sublime: “I’ve just had an . . . an...an apostrophe!” he exclaims!

“Apostrophe, indeed!” Hook mutters with evident exasperation, “I think you mean an epiphany.” (Carr, as cited in Duncan, 1)

Reverend Tom Carr expounds on Smee’s confusion: “We have not come here today to celebrate an apostrophe, though we might say we’ve come to celebrate an exclamation point. Christ has come into our world! Light has shined into our darkness! We’ve come to celebrate an Epiphany.”

Epiphany is a Greek term that means “to show or reveal.” People speak of having an epiphany when in a flash they see things as never before, a moment of clarity, a revelation that changes the way they see themselves or the world or their plan or purpose, a solution to a long standing problem. An epiphany is when someone else does or says something that clearly “shows” meaning and helps people come to a better understanding. An epiphany moment is when the light bulb goes on and you see and understand with profound clarity. For Christians, an epiphany is when someone or something or some action or witness shows us who Jesus is and helps us understand better what it means for us to be his disciples, trying to live in his ways, trying to live in the light.

And for Christians, Epiphany is not just a moment, it is the season of the Christian year that begins with the wise men following the star of Bethlehem and discovering the Christ child, then they return home to their native lands and spread the gospel of this newborn king. Each year on Epiphany January 6, twelve days after Christmas, or on Epiphany Sunday the Sunday closest to and preceding Epiphany, we read Matthew’s account of the arrival of the wise men. The wise men were “shown” something new and wonderful about God’s will and purpose. They have seen the light and now spread the light to foreign lands. Throughout Advent and Christmas we have lit candles to announce and

await this light coming into our world, the light that shines in the darkest month of the year, the light which worldly darkness cannot overcome, which evil darkness cannot put out. In the old Southern Presbyterian Church, the PCUS, Epiphany was Witness Season - January, February and March -- a time to focus on world missions and missionaries who were sharing the gospel around the world, carrying the light into foreign lands.

Christ said about our witness that we do not light a candle and hide it under a bushel basket, but we put it on the lamp stand where the world can see it. Christ is the light of the world. When Isaiah proclaimed the coming of the anointed one of God, he declared "Arise, shine, for your light is come." (Isaiah 60:1).

That is our gospel! Our light has come. Christ our light and in him there is no darkness at all. Jesus is our epiphany. There is so much about life we do not understand, cannot understand apart from Christ.

Much of life is a mystery. But in the midst of that mystery, in the midst of that darkness, there is a light shining. It is the light of Jesus Christ.

Today we sing hymns about the wise men coming from the east, following the star. We celebrate these ancient astronomers, foreigner scholars who probably did not know the prophecies in Hebrew Scripture, and who worshiped different gods, who looked to the stars for meaning and direction. But because they had eyes to see, they found a sign to follow. *They studied the stars and they studied their books, and when they discerned the signs, they gathered up gifts fit for a king, gathered their entourage, hitched their camels to a star, and headed up the highways.* Matthew doesn't tell us much about who they were, other than that they were people on a journey of discovery, a long journey, a time consuming journey, traveling over "field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star." These persistent and determined magi journeyed toward the light with its mysterious power and attraction.

Reverend Gordon Timbers recalls a childhood experience of the power and mystery and attraction of light. "One of the children's ministry leaders at my home church many years ago gave a very important lesson about light and about making our Christian witness," Timbers writes.

"Mr. Lockie gathered our group ... together in the downstairs meeting hall. He pulled down the blinds, closed the curtains, and turned out the overhead lights, plunging the room into darkness. As we sat there in the dark, he spoke to us quietly from the far end of the room, telling us how important it was for us to come to know the stories of Jesus so that we could come to know the person the stories were about. He told us that when we ourselves knew Jesus we could then make Jesus known to others by our own words and actions. And to demonstrate the effect we could have – even as one individual, even as a young child – he lit one small candle and we were all amazed at the dramatic effect of that one little light as it cast a contrasting glow in the darkness of the room.

Mr. Lockie asked us to imagine the light of that candle, representing each of us saying a Christlike word or doing a Christlike action, and then to magnify it over and over and over again as our words and actions built the light of Christ in the world around us. This demonstration has stayed with me through the years as an affirmation and encouragement of personal witness and ministry." (Timbers, 209)

If you doubt the power of individual witness, consider the movement back in the 1990's when across the USA inspired people determined to commit random acts of kindness. People mended fences, painted strangers' houses, cleaned up vacant lots, paid toll booth tolls for the strangers in the cars behind them, spoke encouraging words and paid compliments to strangers, paid power strangers bills and utilities anonymously. Personal random acts of kindness big and small had a powerful positive effect, and just imagine the positive power of collective efforts!

Many people wonder if life has any meaning or purpose. Many people only see life as harsh and cruel; random chance, not random acts of kindness. Our faith in Jesus Christ makes no sense to them – because they have yet to see the light of Christ. Life is not random...we are not hapless victims...life has meaning and purpose...life has direction. We may see through a glass darkly, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, but God has a divine plan for life, for the world, for us, for you...and that divine plan is wrapped up in that child lying in a manger in Bethlehem. **Christ is the light to our puzzled minds.**

Jesus Christ is also the light for our troubled hearts.

In the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, a young Judy Garland touched millions of hearts when she sang "Somewhere over the rainbow dreams come true . . ." Many people share her longing to escape to some faraway place where problems "melt like lemon drops." They long for that distant Shangri-la where blue birds fly over the rainbow, and Garland asks, "Why, oh why, can't I?"

Apparently Judy Garland never found that place - she later committed suicide. (5) There are times when all of us know what it is to dream of a happiness somewhere over the rainbow because our own lives are filled with darkness and dread. How we need to see a light shining in the darkness. How we need to experience the release of forgiveness and healing we find in Jesus Christ, the light of puzzled minds and troubled hearts.

Jesus is also light for our defeated spirits. Reverend Duncan King relates the story of Bart Starr, former quarterback of the Green Bay Packers football team.

"Starr once told about a little incentive scheme he had going with his oldest son, Bart, Jr. For every perfect paper Bart, Jr., brought home from school, his dad gave him ten cents. Of course, a dime went a lot farther back then than it does today.

"After a particularly rough game against St. Louis, in which football legend Bart Starr performed poorly, he returned home weary and battered after a long plane ride. But he couldn't help feeling better when he returned to his bedroom. There, attached to his pillow, was a note: "Dear Dad, I thought you played a great game. Love, Bart." Taped to the note were two dimes. (Duncan, 4)

We all need a little encouragement at times.

We all need forgiveness at times.

We all need a little hope and reassurance at times.

2009 has been a tough year in many ways for our world.

Maybe you need somebody to put his hand on your shoulder and to offer the

encouragement you need. “Arise! Shine! Your light has come!” says the prophet Isaiah. Maybe others need encouragement and hope from you, a word of forgiveness from you, a helping hand, a word of truth, a bit of advice or correction, redirection.

It’s Epiphany....share the light of Christ, be the positive force our world needs.
The wise men followed the star and found the light of the world!
May we be the wise ones in our day and time, who follow Christ and spread his light.
Amen.

Sources

Duncan, King. “I’ve Just Had An Apostrophe!” *Dynamic Preaching*, January 6, 2010.
Knoxville: Seven Worlds Publishing.

Timbers, Gordon. *Minster’s Annual Manual 2010*. January 6, 2010: p204-210.