

Good morning, friends. I wish I were seeing you in the pews this morning, joking about this New England weather, passing the Peace of Christ, and being together. I wish we were within arm's reach today, especially since many of us are carrying something heavy inside today.

I am heartbroken by the death of Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old ICU nurse in Minneapolis, who was shot and killed by a Customs and Border Patrol agent as he tried to help a woman who had been pushed to the ground. Alex was a healer. Someone whose daily work was to help people breathe, to stand with families in the hardest moments, to offer care in the most fragile spaces. And now he is gone.

And as someone who spent the majority of my adult life as a nurse, I feel this loss in my body and in my heart. When one healer is taken by violence, it is not just one life lost. It is a wound to the whole community of caring.

And please understand, this is not political posturing on my part. This is pastoral grief. This is about a human life lost. This is about a community wounded. And this is about a kind of violence that leaves ripples of fear, anger, sorrow, and moral exhaustion.

Our lectionary today reminds us of this reality: it does not let us pretend the world is safe.

Isaiah says, "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*" The prophet is talking about political darkness. Fear. Trauma. Lives lived under threat. The light Isaiah proclaims is one of defiance. It shines in the places where people's hopes and lives are being crushed.

Epiphany light today is not soft candlelight. It is a searchlight. It is the light that shines in the dark and shows us what is really happening.

The psalm also knows this kind of world. "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?*" The psalmist names out loud enemies and terror, and yet still dares to proclaim, "*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*"

That line feels especially tender to me today. Because Alex's life, work, presence, and witness all mattered in the land of the living. We are allowed to say his death is not just sad; it is wrong—a loss that should not be normalized or explained away.

And the Gospel places us in a similar moment. Jesus begins his public ministry after John the Baptist is arrested by the state. The Jesus movement starts in the shadow of political violence. It starts when a prophet is silenced. And Jesus does not pull back. He proclaims out loud for all to hear, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

Jesus' message and ministry reorder the world: a way where power isn't based on weapons, and human life isn't expendable. Jesus goes to Gentiles, to the margins, to places polite religion ignores. Matthew dares to say these are the very places where light is found.

That matters for us. It is tempting, especially when we are sitting in our PJs with a nice cup of coffee on Zoom—especially during a snowstorm, when the news feels overwhelming—to look away. We tell ourselves, “It’s all too much.” Or “It’s all too complicated.” Or even, “There’s nothing I can do.”

18th-century British member of Parliament and ardent abolitionist William Wilberforce once wrote, *“You may choose to look the other way, but you can never say again that you did not know.”*

This season of Epiphany is about revelation. About unveiling. About God saying, *“Hey....look here. This is what is happening. This is who is being harmed.”* The light of Christ removes the excuse of ignorance. We may still struggle with what to do. We may still feel overwhelmed. But we cannot honestly say we did not see.

As your pastor, I want to be careful. This is not about guilt. Seeing doesn’t mean fixing everything or having perfect answers. It means letting our hearts break open, letting grief be holy, and giving lament a place in faith.

You know, the Bible is full of lament. *“How long, O Lord?” “Why Lord?”* These are faithful prayers. They are the prayers of people who refuse to pretend everything is fine. They are prayers that trust that God is with us in the midst of our confusion, anger, and grief.

So before we rush too quickly to hope, I want us to pause. Because, you see, hope that skips over grief is not Christian hope. It is only denial.

In just a moment, I will invite us to a brief time of shared silence. I know silence can feel awkward, especially in this virtual environment. But holy silence is still holy, even on Zoom.

If you are comfortable, I invite you to close your eyes or place your hand on your heart.

And we will hold silence for Alex Pretti. For his family. For his coworkers. For all who are grieving. For all who are afraid. For hearts that are hardened. For all who are tired of seeing bodies bear the cost of violence.

Let us keep silence together.

Thank you.

The light that exposes darkness is the same light that refuses to abandon us to it. The same Jesus who begins his ministry in the shadow of violence also calls people by name, forms community, heals bodies, and keeps showing up, even when the world is brutal.

That is not naive optimism. That is stubborn, holy hope. Hope that says violence does not get the last word. Hope that says healers matter, that people who care for each other matter.

Hope that says the kingdom of God is not built with force. Hope that says we will not look away.

On this snowy Sunday, Epiphany invites us to be people who see clearly, grieve honestly, and still dare to follow the light. Not because it is easy. But because love is worth it. Because human life is worth it. Because the land of the living still belongs to God.

Let us pray. God of light and life, receive our grief. Receive our anger. Receive our tears. Release us from hatred and fear. Hold those who mourn. Hold those who are afraid. Hold those who are struggling to believe that goodness can still be found in the land of the living. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.