

Still the Light Shines Giving New Vision

Epiphany I

Scripture: Acts 26:19-32; Matthew 2:1-12 Text: Acts 26:19; Matthew 2:9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is the season of Epiphany and it has become a favorite time of mine. Epiphany is not really a season, although we have often spoken of it as a season here. Epiphany is a festival day, January 6, which of course, was yesterday. In the ancient Church tradition, we are now in that time which is not really a season in the church year. This is the first Sunday after Epiphany and next week will be the second Sunday after Epiphany, and if you want to be technically correct, on the Church calendar, we are in Ordinary days. But, for me, the Festival of Epiphany has become one of my favorite celebrations, I think because of the focus and the theme.

The symbol, of course, is the star; the central idea is that of light, the light that has dawned upon us. The doctrinal or theological emphasis is on revelation. I like the word manifestation - God manifest in our midst, God present to us so that we become aware of that presence in the midst of our lives, in the midst of our world.

Epiphany is from the Greek language and it means, literally, manifestation, and, of course, it reflects back on that season which is just concluded, the twelve days of Christmas and the celebration of Christmas itself, which is the celebration of the Incarnation, the embodiment of God in the midst of our human history, in the human flesh of Jesus.

There is great wisdom in the celebration of the Christian Year. Over the years I have come to appreciate it more and more because it takes me back every year in that annual cycle beginning in the Advent waiting and then the celebration of the birth which is the embodiment of God in our midst. Then we move into those weeks between Epiphany and Lent in which the focus of the Church is on the life and the ministry of Jesus. If I followed the lectionary readings, which large portions of the Church use, every Sunday having assigned scripture passages, today's passage would be the baptism of Jesus, Jesus now on the threshold of his ministry. In these weeks between the celebration of Epiphany and the beginning of Lent, the focus is on Jesus and his life and his teaching and that which came to expression in him, what was experienced in his human journey in the midst of

our human history. So, it is a good season because it focuses our attention on that which is the center of our faith understanding, that which came to expression in Jesus, the manifestation of God in the life of Jesus Christ.

In the older, traditional conception of things, the tradition of the Church, the orthodoxies of the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church, this idea of revelation is very much a past reference. Now, the Church, at its best, knew better, but for all practical purposes, if you have grown up in the Church, if you've listened to sermons world without end, then you know that the emphasis has been on that revelation of God that appeared in Israel and in Jesus, that is told in the words of scripture, so that revelation becomes in our minds, popularly, something that happened in the past of which we have a record, to which we continue to return.

Now, the Church, at its best, for example, John Calvin at the time of the Reformation, understood that God continues to reveal God's self, and Karl Barth, in our own century, reached back to Calvin to speak of the three forms of the word: the word in flesh, Jesus, the center; the word in scripture, the word written which in Israel anticipated him and in the New Testament reflected back on him; and then, a third form of the word was the word preached. The Church at its best understood that there was an ongoing revealing of God, an ongoing manifestation of God's truth and light, even as the word was preached in the present, the very dynamic conception of preaching, the very high estimate of preaching.

But, for all practical purposes once again, if you have just grown up in an ordinary way in an ordinary church, an ordinary Christian experience, you have probably tended to think about revelation as something that happened in the past. In fact, in the old conception of things, God sent God's son like the divine intruder from another world, another realm into our world, there to be experienced, only then to leave again and return to that place from which he came. That is an old cosmology. That is an old conception of the structure of reality.

Let me give you another image. Try this out. I can remember as a kid my mother used to bake bread and I can remember taking the yeast and kneading it into that dough and putting it in a bowl, and putting a towel over it and then setting it on a chair in front of the register so, with the heat, the yeast could do its work and the dough would rise. Let me suggest to you what for me has become a fascinating and exciting new conception of God's manifestation, of God's revealing. Rather than seeing God as dipping into our history, coming in and leaving again, it seems to me what we know about the nature of reality, the nature of the whole cosmic process, the nature of the unfolding of history, that one might better see the manifestation of God as the working of the yeast in the dough, not a light from another realm, but that light that enlightens the totality of things, not from outside, but from within itself, so that manifestation is simply the coming to luminosity of that which is always present within, but here and there comes to

striking, startling manifestation, so that we look and we say, "Ah! I see! I See!" That is an *epiphany* experience. It is the sudden grasping or the calm, quiet coming to realization of that which is true, that which is true about the nature of reality, about the nature of God, about the nature of human existence.

Epiphany is the celebration of the manifestation of God, and I want to suggest, not a God "out there" somewhere, but a God present with us. The incarnation, the experience of Christmas, the truth of Christmas, is the embodiment of God in the human. It is the presence of God with us, and, for Epiphany 2001, let me suggest to you that we open our eyes to the light that still shines. The word *still* in the title of the message has the message in one word - still, the light shines. Still, God is manifest, being manifest, present, progressive tense. That's my Epiphany message to you today, and that, for me, is a critical and crucial movement from where once I was and where most of the Church, frankly, still remains and, if there is one thing that I wish I could send you out of here with today, it is that new and fresh awareness of the still shining light and the ongoing manifestation of God in the midst of our human experience, in the midst of our world history, in the midst of the unfolding, cosmic drama of which we are a part of billions and billions of years, an amazing evolving and emerging.

Still, the light shines. Still, God is being manifest to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Still, the Spirit illumines and gives us fresh insight and helps us to bring into perspective the explosion of knowledge all about us in the modern world, so that we live as people on the way, as people on a journey, with the confidence that as we move into the future, the light will shine as it shines now and has shined in our past.

You see, that is the very nature of human existence. That is what it means to be people who are caught up in the stream of history. It is not that in the scripture we do not have ancient truth and insight. The scripture is a record of the witness of those who have said, "Aha! I see!" and they recorded that, and it continues to be instructive and informative to us. We still read the Hebrew prophets of the eighth century before the Common Era with great profit. We still go back to the Greek philosophers who address the ultimate questions of life with profundity.

Someone has said that the whole of Western philosophy is nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato and Aristotle. We still go back to the Gospels and we study the life of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus, and we gain insight and understanding, wisdom. But, the eighth-century prophets of the Hebrews or even Jesus in the time of Caesar Augustus, or Augustine in the fifth century, or Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, or John Calvin in the 16th century, or the orthodox formulations of Reformed faith, for example, in the 17th century, simply could not give to us what we need today in order to live with understanding, with freedom and with joy because, within the movement of history, there are no absolutes. That is heresy in the Christian Church! Did you hear me? *Within the stream of history, there are no absolutes.* The Church has claimed all through the centuries that

this is absolute truth, that absolute truth dawned in Jesus, and I am saying to you, "No! The wonder of Epiphany is that, in the movement of history that defies absolutes and final answers, the light still shines!" It is not that we are without insight. It is not that we are without revelation. It is simply that, in the very nature of historical reality, it is absolutely essential that the light still shines so that our new circumstances are illumined by that same light that came to expression in special luminosity in Jesus, that same light that informed the Hebrew prophets and the Apostles. It is a present experience of the manifestation of God, or it is nothing. That is the nature of our human, historical existence.

That is scary. Scary, because we so much want certitude. It is scary because life is frail and fragile, perilous and pocked with pitfalls, and it is so deeply human to want a final solution, an absolute truth, an unalterable prescription for life. And the Church has been happy to accommodate. The Church has exploited the fears of people. It has promised absolute truth and the final answer, but it is a false promise that cannot deliver. For all of the light that has shined through the ages and all of the light that has been concentrated in the face of Jesus Christ, history continues to evolve and new situations call for new application of that truth. You cannot go into the scripture and find the ending or the proposed ending of slavery, for example. It took centuries of the ferment of the Gospel to bring people finally to the conviction that a human being was an end in him or herself, not to be used, enslaved.

Oh, the Church has struggled with the Bible, claiming it to be inerrant and infallible, and it is not. And how can it be, for example, when the Church struggles with the position of women in leadership? You can't solve that biblically because it is an ancient book out of an ancient culture with all kinds of different sensitivities and understanding. How can you settle the question of the ordination of women in the Church, for example, by reference to the Bible? Sexual orientation? Why, it's not even in the purview of the scripture. And yet, you hear time and again claims, biblical claims, about sexual orientation, about which the Bible knew nothing. All it knew about was actual sexual practice which could be destructive and abusive. How can you settle that issue by reference to the Bible? You can't. And, unfortunately, the Church has not faced up to that and been honest with the fact that light still shines, that knowledge still breaks forth, that history is movement, that new times demand new answers and new understandings and broader perspectives as the horizon spreads out before us.

Scary. Because we'd like to have it clear, simple, and over with, not having to think about it anymore. It is scary.

But, it is also liberating. Now, if I can once get that monkey off my back of one final, absolute revelation in the past, then I can engage in my historical journey with confidence and with joy. I can lean into the future knowing that, still, the light shines, that new knowledge brings new information and new perspective, and that the manifestation of God in the midst of this marvelous, fascinating,

mysterious cosmic journey of which we're a part continues to dawn upon us, and that is really my Epiphany message today. Still, the light shines. That is wonderful, good news.

We just went through a beautiful Christmas season here. We have the remnants of it, so to speak, and someone was here on the 24th at all three services, in the morning that marvelous cantata and pageant, the thrilling music and the Christmas story, the quieter candlelight Eucharist service at 9:00 in the evening, and then the traditional Lessons and Carols, the late service. This person, one of the core volunteers of this place then came here on Wednesday (the church had been closed on Monday, Christmas Day and the day following), and this place which had been so regal in its splendor and had reverberated with marvelous music and the mystery of the celebration, now lay in shambles, candlewax all over the pews and the carpets, poinsettia leaves scattered throughout, shepherds' costumes draped here and there, used candles lying every place, and she came into the office to say, "You know, I was at all three services on Sunday. What a place this is! Each one of the services so different; each one of them so moving, so beautifully executed, seemingly without effort and without a hitch. Then I come in and I see the shambles afterwards and I realize what it takes to do that. Nobody knows how many people put forth how much effort to make that possible," and I said, "Well, that's true. There are a few people that know, however."

A few people also said to me, "What are you going to do next year," realizing that this is the last Christmas of John Gregory Bryson, who is so integral to all of that, and with stiff upper lip, I said, "Well, we're going to retire his number and then we're going to do just fine." We're going to do just fine, just as we are after I preach my last Epiphany service. This place is going to be just fine, because we live in the conviction that still the light shines and we don't come to an absolute place, a final word, a resting place that is frozen forever, but we are a people in movement and the thing about this place is that we have learned that, and we are free, and we believe that the best is yet to be, because still the light shines, giving new vision.

I ran into my old compatriot, Gord VanHoeven, in Bill's Barber Shop this week, and the two of us got to reminiscing a bit. It's a sign of our age, I think, two old men talking about the past, getting almost sentimental if not senile, and we talked about Gord's 18 years here that he shared with me. We spoke about what a good place this is and has been.

A year ago this month the Team gathered with a counselor to think about the transitions that are underway here. This congregation is in transition and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out. One look at the hoary head and visage of your preacher is enough to indicate that there is going to be a change one of these days. As we gathered with the Team a year ago, we started to look at the whole pattern, and within the next three or four months everything unraveled

and changed. Ron Zoet couldn't get blood out of a turnip, so he thought he'd go after living blood with the American Red Cross. We all began to be pressed about what our timeline was. Peter discovered he was a year younger than he thought he was, found out the year he was really born. Colette decided it was better for her to concentrate on Worship Center and preaching and teaching, and Bob is, of course, in the midst of his internship for a Master's of Social Work, and how will that all work out? And Mr. Bryson, recognizing the many years of service, wanting to have a little more freedom, tells of his imminent departure. Well, in the midst of it all this summer, realizing how much continuity we had, what gifted and dedicated and loyal people we've had, recognizing that we are in this period of transition, one day I looked at Peter and Cynthia Moll with whom I have been working for The Center of Religion and Life, and I said, "Why don't you two come and run the church?" And in September they began and I realize in retrospect that was really the first step of transition, and the governance boards have stepped forward and have owned that process.

On Friday of this week the Board of Trustees will go to the Center for Innovation. Don't you love that name? The Center for Innovation where there is a consultant for business and corporations who is going to sit with them and who has agreed as a gift to us to lead us through a discussion of the future. On the 10th of February, all the governance groups will meet with him in an all-day retreat as we look at the whole pattern and the whole picture. I tell you this because you ought to know what's going on in this congregation, the fact that we are in a period of transition. You want to ask me for a date, I'll say two years, five years, seven years, ten years. I don't know. I have no date set. I am determined I am going to make this bear dance one more time, whatever it takes. But, I share this with you because I can do it in an Epiphany celebration in the realization that, still, the light shines and that the future of this place is better than anything we have ever dreamed of, and it is because we have paid a price and struggled and wrestled and have emerged with a kind of freedom and joy that enables us, having faced up to so much that ties traditional Christianity in knots, freeing us to move into the future in creative ways of which we have not even conceived.

You see, still the light shines, and we will shape the future rather than just lollygagging along, being shaped by what comes our way. Montgomery Wards is out of business. They tried to reorganize over the last couple of years, the CEO came on the television to say the soft retail market made it impossible. They have to close. I say, "Soft retail market! What you're telling me, sir, is that you were unable to negotiate a world of Wal-Marts and Lowe's and all the rest." The Church is no different. If we're all tied up with some absolute word that happened in the past, nailing us to the mores, insights, sensitivities and knowledge of an ancient culture, we are in trouble, indeed. But, if we have learned that still the light shines, giving vision, then we can believe that the future holds for us wonders, mysteries, and celebrations that we've not yet dreamed of.

This is no ordinary place. There are ordinary congregations all over the country. This is no ordinary place. You are here because you choose to be here. You are here because of what this place stands for, requires and affirms, and this remnant people, liberated and set free, has the conviction that the future is unfolding in marvelous ways. I can say with Paul, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. In his defense before a Roman governor and a Jewish king, he gave the account of his own story. Don't you realize that Paul saw a light that knocked him off his horse and turned him around 180 degrees? Don't you realize that Paul had to look at everything for which his life's passion was beating and say, "My God! I was wrong!" Don't you see that the quest of the Magi is the symbolic story of that yearning of the human heart for God, that yearning of the human heart for light and for truth, and in that beautiful Christmas story of those wise ones we have the symbol of that which lies deep within us, but we have come to realize that it is not a matter of getting some absolute word or light that dawned in the past, but it is the coming to ourselves of an inward conviction, a deep, deep human intuition so that I can say, "I believe!" That is what is different about this place, and that is why the future is good.

Ah! What a place! What a future! What a possibility! God's final word has yet to be spoken. Still, the light shines. Plaster it on your refrigerator. Write it on your cupboards. Sing your children to sleep with it nights. Still, the light shines - giving new vision! That's Epiphany and you can say, "Ah, I see! I See!"