

# When the Radiance Breaks Through

## The Feast of Epiphany

*Text: Isaiah 60:1-7, Matthew 2:1-12*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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This is the Sunday we celebrate Epiphany, the manifestation and revelation of the eternal God, the Creator Spirit, as that revelation was embodied in the whole Gospel story. On the Festival of Epiphany, we celebrate the light of Jesus that has come into the world. The symbols are obvious in the Magi coming from the East representing the flowing of the nations to the light that was Israel's. There was in the Prophet's imagination this dream of the nations and the kings of the earth coming to the light that was written about in the Torah, the Jewish scriptures.

What a presumptuous dream, really. This little tribal people who were convinced that the eternal God, the Creator, had dawned upon them and had given them the light of life. They had the chutzpah to believe that the whole world would flow to be instructed in Torah as the exaltation of Mt. Zion is a theme in the Hebrew scriptures. Of course, presumptuous though it was, it was a marvelous dream, because if you go on a little further in the writing of this particular prophet, you would have that magnificent vision of shalom - a place where people would plant gardens and eat the produce thereof; they would build houses and dwell in them; where the lion and the lamb would lie down together and where no one would hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain. So, although it was a presumptuous, impossible dream that was dreamed in this small corner of the earth by this relatively insignificant little people, nonetheless it was a big dream, and it was a proper dream. It was a dream that arises from the deep intuition of the human heart that the world could be other than it is. The world wouldn't have to go on with war and violence and exploitation and domination. If only the light of God would break through, radiance across the board, there could be a human family, a humane family. Things really could be other than they are. And again, there was that dream in Israel's prophet that believed that it would be.

The realization of that dream of the prophet never amounted to anything, for the returned community to Jerusalem was a community marked by poverty and dissension and so never really amounted to much of anything. The whole period between Israel's return from exile and the birth of Christ is a period in which Israel was under domination. There was a period of independence that again lost

its footing. So, what hope was there for that little people? For all of the magnificence of the dream?

But, then, of course, the event of Jesus happened and the whole erupted around him, including what he embodied, what he spoke, and the community that developed around him. When that community began to tell the story, Matthew, for one, told the story in terms of that ancient dream. Now that ancient dream would come to pass and would be realized through the birth of this child. And so the Magi come from the East following the star and bringing their gifts, and they worshiped this one. Matthew says that is the way, that is the way of the future, and his gospel ends with this same one Jesus saying to his disciples, "Go into all the world and teach the gospel to all nations," because the vision was of the global conquest of this story born in Israel, born of Israel, embodied in Jesus and continuing through the institution of the Christian church. The light has come and now we simply wait for the realization of that promise that all nations will finally flow to that light and bring obeisance to that king of kings.

So, that is the story. It is our story. But, there are other stories, because what has been true from the beginning of our time is that we stand and we wonder before the whole mystery of our existence. We wonder before the mystery of reality, for as human beings we are lifted briefly on the stage of history's drama. We are compelled to be actors in that drama. As actors in that drama, fully submerged in the stream of history itself, we have no knowledge of its beginning nor of its issue. Here we are actors on the stage of history with our beginning and our ending shrouded in mystery. And so, of course, people have wondered where did it all stem from, where will it all issue, and what does it all mean in the meantime. We are creatures who have come in the evolutionary process to the point at which we have become aware. It is a relatively recent experience of the human being to have some sense of that distant past and to wonder about where it will all go. The religions of the world are simply the human being standing before all that, standing in wonder, standing in awe, yearning for some clue as to what it all means and longing for some comfort and some security in the midst of the peril of it all. That is really the human situation.

So, religion has been universal. All peoples have had that experience of wondering, of longing and yearning, of questing, and the Magi are simply symbolic of that hunger of the human heart. That is our human condition. Obviously, if that is our condition, we need some revelation and in the ancient stories, in the ancient texts, there were revelations, and I would do that in quotation marks. They were the intuitions or the insights or the understanding of prophets and poets of the past in various contexts and different places among different people who had some sense and who had the story that seemed to resonate in the human breast. It seemed to make some sense. It gave some merit, some comfort, some security. And so, we are a people in the midst of the drama of history with each end shrouded in mystery who are looking for a clue as to

what it is all about, and the interesting thing is that it would seem as though revelation ceased a couple thousand years ago.

And yet, what we have come to learn just in the last 300 years is more amazing and more significant than anything in an ancient text, for we have become creatures of self-consciousness and awareness, and now with our scientific knowledge, we have some sense of how the process began, of the development of the process. As I have been trying to say during this Christmas season, if we really understand the depths of incarnation and what we see there, the deep intuition there is that creative spirit, that eternal creative spirit or energy has become incarnate in us, the incarnation in Jesus, not one once for all, but one significant or symbolic of all, and so that the process of which we are now becoming aware and which we have vast knowledge, although we still know so little, nonetheless, actors on the stage as we are, we have some knowledge and the knowledge that we have come to if we could understand it is that we are not only the actors, we are writing the script. That is scary, and that is a radical thing for me to say. But, what I am saying on this Epiphany Sunday is that the light that has shined, the radiance that has broken through, the knowledge that we have has put us in the position of being responsible now for how the play ends. Or, at least how the play continues.

It is so wonderful to celebrate these beautiful religious festivals, the wonder and the glory that is Christmas, and even this morning the procession of the kings again and singing "We Three Kings of Orient Are," that never seems to get over, and it touches us deeply. It touches those deep emotional chords, and it is good. But, you know friends, I am so struck by this more and more and more, that we celebrate that delightful story as the thing that God has done and now we are waiting for God to do the next thing, and we're God. God is in us. And the next act will be written by us, for religion can become so familiar that it doesn't break through to us anymore. But, as a matter of fact, we have just celebrated Christmas again and our world is in crisis, and I don't think there is going to be a revelation in Washington or in Baghdad or in North Korea. But, you know what? We don't need further revelation.

What we really need is a transformation of consciousness on the basis of the revelation we have, because we know that the world could be different than it is. When the third Isaiah dreamed it in little Israel, it was a tribal people and a little corner of real estate, a magnificent dream, an impossible dream, a preposterous dream. I can understand that the prophet had to believe that it would be God that would bring it to pass. But, God is not going to bring it to pass. If we could dream the dream in this nation and this year of our Lord 2003, we could bring it to pass. We could figure it out.

Now, you can say, for example the Ten Commandments, "Thus saith the Lord ." That is supposed to give weight to those commandments, but as a matter of fact, you could sit down as human beings at this point and think about what is it going

to take to have a civil, decent, moral society? You could come up with ten rules or a dozen. You don't really need the thunder of heaven at this point. We are aware enough, we know enough, we have at our fingertips resources, technology. We don't need thunder from heaven. We don't need a bright star. We could create an alternative world if we had a mind and a will to, couldn't we?

I don't think that transformation of consciousness is going to come from our political system. I don't think it is going to come from our economic system. I don't think it is going to come from the church. We are all implicated in this. We get the politics we deserve and presently it is obvious our politics are bought and paid for, and we have a consumer society that is being consumed with more compulsion to consumption. And so, there are reasoned arguments raised against every prophetic cry of warning about the fact that we cannot just go on this way with such a lopsided balance of power against the masses. We can't go on this way with the use of resources in a wasteful fashion without concern for the future of the planet. We can't go on this way trying to batten the hatches on terrorism and violence. We can't go on that way. And yet, no one is going to tell us that, whether in state or church because life gets institutionalized and there is so much vested interest and nobody tells the truth.

There are some contemporary voices. We got a Christmas card from Peter and Helen Hart. Peter did a little re-imagining of John Lennon's "Imagine." I was not familiar with John Lennon's lyrics, I was struck by them. (I never was a Beatle fan; I never had a youth; I never had an adolescence; I studied the Bible. I didn't even know there were Beatles) Just listen to John Lennon:

*Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try.  
No hell below us, above us only sky.  
Imagine all the people living for today.*

I guess he wants to imagine no heaven because he wants to get rid of that supernatural super-cop, and no hell because he wants to get rid of that manipulative instrument by which the church has controlled people. And then he says,

*Imagine there's no countries; it isn't hard to do,  
nothing to kill a guy for, no religion, too.  
Imagine all the people living life in peace.*

If there were no countries, there'd be no nationalism. If there was no nationalism, there wouldn't be the rhetoric that would fire up people and drive them into war. If there weren't any countries, he's saying, then nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too because he was insightful enough to know that religion has been one of the fomenters of violence through our history.

*Imagine no possessions. I wonder if you can.  
No need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man.*

*Imagine all the people sharing all the world.  
You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.  
I hope some day you'll join us and the world will be as one.*

With a little imagination, Peter reversed John Lennon but really said the same thing in terms of our story, if we believed it.

*Imagine there's a heaven, it's easy if you try.  
When love is all around us and beauty fills the sky.  
Imagine all the people living for today.*

*Imagine all the countries, it isn't hard to do,  
The rule of law to guide us and religion, too.  
Imagine all the people living life in peace.*

*Imagine our possessions. I wonder if you can.  
As gifts for need and hunger according to God's plan.  
Imagine all the people sharing all the world.*

*Our hope is not just dreaming, for once was born a son  
who lived that we might follow him and the world would be as one.*

I suspect that one day there will be an eruption on the part of the people who are going to say to presidents and popes and cardinals and preachers and politicians, "Get out of the way, because you are so tied in to systems and structures that still have archaic solutions and primitive impulses that we the people don't have time for you anymore, for we the people know it could be different than it is." And I suspect it's going to be a John Lennon, some poet somewhere, artist, someone of the people who is going to say the word to which we are all going to say, "Yes," and the radiance will break through. The world will be marked by compassion and kindness and grace and love and justice and fairness.

Someone said if we were going to create a world and none of us knew how we were going to end up, a world now marked by haves and have-nots, what if we were all together in a pot and we didn't know we were going to end up at the top or the bottom or where we might end up. What if we had to start from scratch and we all had to sit down and create a world? If we had to design a world, how would we design the world? Wouldn't we design the world where everybody would have a fair shake? Wouldn't we design a world where there was humane existence everywhere? Wouldn't we design a world where there was no poverty or hunger or disease? Wouldn't we design a world that is so different than the world we're now dominating? Sure we would. We know better. We know enough to write the script and create a world that hasn't yet been dreamed of.

Dream about it. You can do it if you dare.