

*Shine, Jesus, Shine*

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

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

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Epiphany Sunday

Christmas, that wonderful time of year with decorations, gifts, food, friends and family. It's a lot of bother, but admit it: we love it! It's always a bit of a let-down once we've entered the new year and the decorations get put up. Now we have to wait a whole year before it comes again! Well, eleven months. Or more like ten and a half. It's easy to see Christmas as the most important time of the year, from a secular perspective as well as a religious perspective. Indeed, sometimes the secular blow-out seems in danger of overshadowing the religious aspect, prompting some folks to trumpet that Jesus is the reason for the season!

Yet Christmas has not always been such a big deal in Christianity. First of all, as you may know, it was not always celebrated on December 25. The first record of Christmas being celebrated on that day is from a church record book written in 354. And even at that late date, not all of Christendom celebrated Christmas on that day. Furthermore, for the first couple of centuries, Jesus' birth was not celebrated at all. Early Christians found birthdays to be rather pagan in nature, so ironically they objected to celebrating Jesus' birth for religious reasons! (And incidentally, there are still some churches to this very day who feel the same.)

But while birthdays were viewed with suspicion, early Christians did find something to celebrate about the arrival of Christ. They just took a more theological approach to the whole thing. The important thing was not Jesus' birth *per se*, but the fact that God had now been revealed or made manifest in the world, and the word for that in Greek is *epiphany*. For a variety of reasons that I won't get into here – you look it up yourself on Wikipedia – January 6 was chosen as the day to celebrate God's epiphany in Jesus Christ, and so it is that what today is merely a blip on the church calendar was once more important than the biggest shopping season of the financial year.

In those confusing early centuries, when people were still figuring out this new religion of Christianity, Epiphany was indeed sometimes observed as being the birthday of Jesus. But there came to be three other events in the life of Jesus that were seen as more revelatory than simply Jesus getting himself born, and those stories continue to be associated with Epiphany to this day. One is the story of the Magi, as we heard in our scripture reading, and so it is that this holiday is also known as the Feast of the Kings. The story of the Magi, who were foreigners from far-flung parts of the world – shows that God's revelation was not only for Jews, but for everyone in the world. The second story associated with Epiphany is the baptism of Christ, when Jesus appeared before John the Baptist at the river Jordan, and the skies opened up and a dove came down with a voice saying, "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased." This was the first public announcement that Jesus was someone very special, that he was in fact the Messiah. The final story associated with Epiphany may be a bit of a surprise to you, but I think it sheds light on how early Christians thought of these things. Does anyone know what story it is? It is the wedding at Cana, when Jesus turned water into wine. Why is this story so important? Well, if you read the baptism story carefully, you find that it's not clear if that voice spoke out loud for everyone to hear, or if only Jesus heard it. So the wedding at Cana is important because it was Jesus' first public miracle. He showed his hand, as it were, and now everyone knew there was something special about this guy. I like the fact that there's no real religious significance to the wedding and the wine. It was simply Jesus helping everyone have a good time

at an ordinary human event. If you think about it, that means God became manifest in our everyday lives, and not in some huge religious event.

Perhaps that is far more about Epiphany than you ever cared to know, but I think this often overlooked holiday is a really important one. We do take big holidays like Christmas and Easter almost for granted, and lesser holidays like Epiphany can help us think of the Christian story in fresh ways. These holy days have stories and rituals and symbols associated with them that convey meaning in a variety of ways. So it is that along with the stories I mentioned, Epiphany is also associated with light. The shining star that guided the Magi to the manger, Jesus as the light that shines for all to see. It is an image that resonates throughout the Bible, from the creation story where God said, "Let there be light!" to prophecies like that spoken by Isaiah, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!" Elsewhere, Isaiah says, "The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light, and upon them has the light shined." Beautiful hymns continue the theme, with Jesus as the morning star, brightest and best.

Yet even when we have these stories and symbols and hymns, we still need to pause and ask ourselves. Epiphany is about God's revelation, but what exactly is revealed? How does God appear in Jesus? It's sort of like that bumper sticker that declares "Jesus is the answer!" as if we know what the question is. Indeed, an answer is no good at all if we don't know what the question is. We trumpet that "God has appeared in Jesus!" as if that statement in and of itself explains everything, makes everything perfectly clear *in the bright light of day*, as it were. But what, really, does that even mean?

Well, let's take this image of Jesus as the light of the world, the bright morning star. And let's ask, what exactly is light? Not from a scientific perspective, although that could be theologically interesting (is it a particle or a wave, human or divine?) but more in terms of us humans. Light means the ability to see. Light makes things visible to us. It illuminates. So it is that light is metaphorically associated with understanding, comprehension, knowledge, wisdom. Okay, that's good. We can see how these concepts would be associated with Jesus. But that's not the only thing light can do. Think about if you're in a really dark room. It's the middle of the night and you've woken up. You flick on the light – can you see right away? No. You shut your eyes, because the light is too dazzling. Your eyes need time to adjust – now there's another interesting metaphor! Too much light, light that is too bright or too sudden can be dazzling, confusing, it can even blind, which is why you're not supposed to stare into the sun. And that could be an interesting metaphor as well!

We are the people who have walked in darkness, and upon us has the light shined in Jesus. That light enables us to see, it shows us what is there. It doesn't make things magically appear! Rather, it shows us what is right in front of us, what is all around us. That's interesting. But just because you can see the roads before you doesn't automatically mean you know which road to take. So Jesus shows us what is in front of us, but even in his light we can still misinterpret what we see, we can miss what's important by focusing on the wrong thing, or we can misuse what is before us. How can this happen with Jesus? Well, I think of an eloquent quote from Victor Hugo, who speaking scornfully of a character in one of his books said, "He used the Bible like a drunkard uses a lamp post, for support and not illumination."

You've seen that, haven't you? None of us has ever been guilty of that ourselves, but we've seen it in others, right? People who have been given the light in the Bible, the light in Jesus, yet they see only what they want to see. They use that light to justify themselves, confusing their prejudices or their judgments with God's. Or they may be so dazzled by the bright and shiny of Jesus (ooh, miracles! Water into wine, woo-hoo!) that they think it's their job to ram that light down other people's throats, to march all over everyone who doesn't get it the way they do. Which is why I'm a bit skeptical of people who too loudly protest that Jesus is the reason for the season. Yes, it's true, but are they using that truth to impose their beliefs, their rituals and practices, on other people?

It's a fine line, and it's definitely open to interpretation. But I think about when I was a member of a Curves work-out place. They would play CDs while the women exercised, and my local one would periodically play Christian music. To me, this implied that they only cared about the sensibilities of those members who were Christian. What if a member was Jewish, or Hindu, or no religion at all? Should they have to workout to music proclaiming Jesus as Lord? I talked to the manager, and she saw this music as a form of evangelism. She said to me, "If you see a car about to go over a cliff, don't you have an obligation to try to save those people?" Well, she has a point, but to me she had been dazzled by the shiny of Jesus, as if just playing background music about "Shine, Jesus, shine!" will be enough to convert someone to Christianity. Whereas for me, it's far more important to act in a Jesus-like way, which is to meet people where they are with hospitality and grace, and not use religion like a club to beat them over the head. To me what she was doing was like saving that car by ramming into the side of it with the humvee of Jesus. Sure, you might push it out of harm's way, but you'd probably cause a lot of injury in doing so. Who is right? Who is seeing clearly? And who might be a bit dazzled, perhaps even blinded by the shiny?

It goes back to this question of what exactly is revealed in Jesus? The first letter of John says, "This is the message we have heard from him and that we proclaim to you: God is light, and in God there is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5) But what does that mean? That Jesus is the humvee of salvation? A light of laser heat and force that blasts away everything in its path? Or is Jesus gentle, like a candle flame or starlight? We will perhaps all answer this question a little differently, but the letter of John says over and over and over again, "God is love. When we love one another, God is present with us." To me, that is what is manifest in Jesus, that is what he illuminates, that is what he reveals. God is love, and if I'm trying to share that light in any way that is not loving, then I'm misinterpreting it or misusing it.

Here is where the story of the Magi sheds further light. For as we talked about during advent, Herod and the Magi all see the same star. The same light shines on all of them. They even come to the same interpretation about what this star means: a new king has been born to the Jews. But their response to this light was as different as, well, as night is from day. Herod received this light and was dazzled, blinded, even maddened by it, to the point where he ordered infanticide. But the Magi received it as something to celebrate. They sought the child out in order to bring gifts and pay homage. The same light that blinded Herod illuminated the path for the Magi.

This is the promise, but also the warning of Epiphany. Jesus is indeed the answer. But are we wise enough to ask the right questions?