

## MAKE HIS FACE TO SHINE UPON YOU

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 6, 2008

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

The three magi, magicians, wise men, kings however you choose to think of them are mysterious if nothing else. They're every costume designer's delight who has ever made robes for the children's Christmas pageant. They are the ones who get the gold lame, the ermine collars, the velvet robes. Crowns and waistbands, and leather sandals, turbans and wondrous gifts packaged ornately.

They come on the scene in Matthew's gospel as foreign visitors, Persians perhaps, bearing gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Gold to represent their royal station, frankincense the herbs and oils of the priest, and myrrh the embalming ointment of the prophets, its bitter perfume overpowering even the odors of death and dying. They, like Joseph, are influenced by dreams, and they are guided by a star, and informed by a psalm<sup>1</sup> and a prophecy.<sup>2</sup>

They are also naïve to a large extent, seeking counsel from Herod, tetrarch and ruler of Galilee, whom to them seem clueless to have expected to be jealous of a usurper king of the Jews. It is no wonder that Herod ordered the massacre of the innocents, the death of all newborn male children under the age of two years. But somehow they didn't get the memo about jealousy, and barged right into Herod's palace to ask directions like Midwesterners trying to understand their subway maps, stopping a pickpocket to explain the mystery to them.

If this season of Presidential wannabes has any lesson to teach us, politics and statecraft is an ugly business and jealousy is everywhere. As Mike Huckabee said so well, "If you don't like the sight of your own blood, you'd better stay in the stands." But the Magi wandered into the palace and asked Herod where he could be found, the child born king of the Jews. And Herod began plotting at precisely that moment.

The story comes later in the Christmas season, and begins the brief time in the liturgical year called Epiphany, which in the original language means to uncover or to reveal, hence *to shine*. This is the feast celebration of Christ's shining!

There is no way that the Luke version of Christmas with its shepherds and angel choruses can be made to fit with the Matthew version of mysterious dreams and prophetic expectation, not to mention political intrigue and bloody aftermath, the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem.

The arrival of the magi, for all practical purposes was likely not on the night of Jesus' birth, but rather some weeks later as traveling realities would dictate. So Twelfth night, or Epiphany, comes on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January each year, this year on a Sunday, a sort of Christmas plus one. So we leave the decorations out for one more Sunday, not in order for those who have been away to see what the church looks like decorated, but because the shouting is not yet over. Now we are still dealing with the "so what?" question that Sarah so ably raised last week.

Isaiah adds to the festivity of Epiphany with his bright and energetic admonition to “Rise and shine for the glory of the Lord has risen upon you... Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” And all of it points to the arrival of those mysterious magi who do as the chorus bids us do, *come and worship, come worship, Christ the Lord, the newborn king.*

“Rise and shine” was the greeting my mother used each morning to call all of us out of bed and down for breakfast. I really didn’t know that it was a Biblical phrase as a boy. I’m not sure my mother did, either. It just served, as it does in so many homes, as reveille, one of those phrases that gets used in the family all the time with no attribution to its source. My sisters and brother and I took it as the call to get up and put on a smiling face and be ready for a bright new day. *Rise and shine...* each day began, and still does, with Isaiah’s words silently finishing with the reminder, *for the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

If Epiphany is about Christ’s shining in our world, it is no wonder that it is an important theme in the story of his life. His shining into our dark world is something that the gospel evangelist John deemed important to put into words in his version of the meaning of Christ’s life. “The light shines in the darkness,” John says, “and the darkness did not overcome it.”

In Matthew’s gospel Jesus himself teaches that we should let our light so shine before others that they may see our good works and give glory to God in heaven.<sup>3</sup> And in another place, speaking of the struggle between evil and good, Jesus says that when evil has been destroyed by the Son of Man, the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

There’ll be a lot of rising and shining in the kingdom of heaven evidently. And that’s pretty good news in this darkest of all seasons when we enter into the short days and long nights of winter, the season of weariness when the holiday blahs set in, and the worries of the economy wear us down, and mortality rates rise.

They call it the sundowner effect in medicine. Those who have chest congestion and lung problems and chronic coughs seem to have the most trouble after the sun goes down each day. Death rates are higher at night rather than during the daylight hours, and no one is quite sure why. Those with mental difficulties, and who suffer from confusion are more agitated when the night comes ‘round. It’s as if our bodies are sympathetic to the rhythms of the environment around us. At night we are more apt to struggle than in the day.

And of course there is a certain darkness to our world as well. The catalog of woes is wearying and no one seems to know how to fix what is wrong. Terror afoot in the world, Pakistan teetering near chaos, the war in Iraq slowing down but who knows what’s really going on, Kenya out of nowhere this past week boiling over like a pot on the stove.

And closer to home, the darkness of our personal problems are equally wearying. Cancer shows up unexpectedly and a young family is caught up in a battle that will change them all. A marriage grows cold and neither of them is talking about it, just letting the problems drift like snow falling through the night, accumulating without

comment. Addiction problems nag and lure, the struggle never over, the darkness of the soul and the silent secrets kept. And this week came news that HIV infection is spreading more rapidly among young gay men than any other population, and we thought our processional cross was a relic remembering a page from the past!

There is a darkness about these days that yearns for light like the dawn dispersing the night when it reaches for the shining.

Rise, shine, for your light has come, says Isaiah, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

We thought the light was about the star and the brightness that the magi followed in the heavens that dark night, when all along it was the light from the stable that we were seeking, the light shining from the face of the newborn child that brought hope and possibility into the darkness of the world.

What is it about children that make us smile, that brightens our lives, that shines upon us so brilliantly? This week I received email pictures from proud parents who wanted to share their joy with friends. Pamela Appea sent a picture of Sarah and me and Shahin, her son, a baptismal picture taken here in the sanctuary a couple of weeks ago. It wasn't my best shot, but Shahin... he was bright and shining, with his wild John the Baptist hair and his eyes wide open to the world. What a kid! His mother was beaming from ear to ear. We all were beaming from ear to ear.

And then Mike and Erin Blanton sent pictures of Andrew just born December 22<sup>nd</sup>. There he was in the arms of Erin's parents. And the grandparents were shining like the sun with pride and joy. And Erin happy and excited and smiling in another picture. And in the last picture poor dad, Mike, sitting in a chair holding little Andrew, looking like it was Mike who had been through labor and not Erin.

But something there is about little ones that get us shining. Those kids on the steps each Sunday to say a prayer, imps and angels, boys with frogs in their pockets and girls with braids in their hair, they are the joy of all of us.

How fortunate we are that they are here to laugh and cry and wiggle and squirm and mug to their parents out in the congregation, because they know it makes us shine with joy, even when we are exasperated and exhausted by them. Because what would we be without them? It's why we choose to have kids in the first place. Why some of you have traveled to China, or worked so hard with adoption agencies, or prayed for pregnancy, spent a fortune at fertility clinics, why even our gay parents have wanted children so badly, because the light that shines in the eyes of a child brings hope and joy to the lives of all of us.

One of my favorite pictures in my office is of a child in a previous congregation I served who had a glorious smile. Laura has autism and is limited in her ability to express herself verbally. But she took a shining to me and week after week, in the youth fellowship she would make sure she sat at my table for dinner. I would ask her questions, or direct some comments to include her, and it was like magic. Every week as she left the table she would look away from me, not daring to meet my eyes, and say, "I love you Jon Walton." Believe me when I tell you I could pretty much find my way through the whole dark week with just that much light!

So many of the great artists have shown the nativity scene, the bare stable, the dark cave, the dim glow of a lantern, and the faces of Mary and Joseph and the Magi and the shepherds gathered around Jesus illuminated by the child laid in the manger, as if there were a hundred watt bulb sitting there in the straw with him, radiating all around. I'm not sure I believe in real halos, but I know it was an illumination that did not dim throughout Jesus' life.

It shined when he preached one day on a mountain side and taught the poor in spirit that theirs is the kingdom of heaven, when he blessed the meek and promised that they would inherit the earth. He shined one day in Galilee when a man with paralysis carried by friends on a stretcher crossed his path, and he forgave his sins and bid him walk, and he did.

He emanated light that day when a leader in the synagogue came to him and told him that his daughter had just died and begged him to come shine light on the darkness of death; and Jesus reached out to her and raised her.

He was so radiant that one day a man who was both blind and mute gained his sight and spoke, because even he saw Jesus' brightness. And one day late in his ministry Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him on a mountainside where he was transfigured before them, his clothes dazzling white, his face shining like the sun, Matthew says.

His glory shone one memorable day on a cruel and hateful cross outside the city's walls where he died a terrible death of pain and suffering. And he never shined more brightly than on that morning three days later when he rose from the tomb and showed us all that the power of God's love is stronger even than death and all the worst the world can bring to bear.

The world has never been the same since that day. For this is a world shot through with his radiance, if only we will have the eyes to look and see his light.

For our sake and for our salvation he came among us as light to our darkness. And where he was and where he is the light shines still for the darkness has never put it out.

This is what we mean when we say in the blessing taken from the words of Aaron, "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you..."<sup>5</sup>

So we go into these winter days with hope, comforted by the knowledge that the light that has shined in the darkness can still dispel the shadows of our doubts and fears. That by the light of the manger and the brightness of the empty tomb we can wrap ourselves against the winter cold and live our winter lives, confident that he is with us still and ever will be, shining in the night, and blazing like the sun.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 72

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 24

<sup>3</sup> Mt. 5:16

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<sup>4</sup> Mt. 13:43

<sup>5</sup> Number 6:23