

Revealing Glory
Isaiah 60:1 – 6; Matthew 2:1 – 12; Ephesians 3:1 – 12
Sunday, January 6, 2019

I want to start by showing you a gift that I gave Jen for Christmas. It's this snowman that I got at Hallmark. Have any of you seen this? You push this little lever at the bottom at it does *this*. So you're not just turning on the lights on your Christmas tree. You're turning them on in a big, grand, celebratory way. A glorious announcement leads to the lights coming on. And *this* is exactly what Epiphany is about.

Epiphany is the day when we hear the story of the wise men coming to Jesus. But there is so much more to it than that. If you look up the word epiphany in the dictionary, it is defined as “a revelation; when something appears or shows forth or is made manifest.” When someone says, “I had an epiphany,” they are saying, “Something that wasn't clear to me before, is clear now. Something that I couldn't see before, I can see it now.” It's about something being revealed. Some kind of knowledge is made known to you. A mystery is revealed to you. An epiphany is that moment where the lights come on and you *get* it.

The word Epiphany comes from the Greek word *epiphanaus*, which means, “appearance,” “to appear,” or “to reveal.” That comes from a word that means, “glorious” or, “glory.” That comes from a word that means, “to shine,” “to bring light,” “to make visible.” So Epiphany has to do with the coming of light that reveals glory. And *light* can only *come* when there is *darkness*. So what we are reminded of today is how God shines light to reveal God's glory in the midst of darkness. And we *see* that in these three texts that we read today. So what we're going to do is look at how the light shines and God's glory is revealed in each of these three texts.

We start with Isaiah, where God says to the people of Israel, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” And then we get the part where it talks about the nations shall come to Israel bringing gold and frankincense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord. Now, it’s easy to read this as just serving as “background” for the story in Matthew where the wisemen come bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and praising Christ. But this is not just here to foreshadow Matthew’s story and lay the groundwork for Jesus; it has its own significant context.

This section of the book of Isaiah is thought to have been written around the year 530 B.C. What was *happening* in that time was that the people of Israel had just spent the past 200 years in exile, conquered by foreign nations. The Assyrian army had invaded Israel, destroyed their cities and their Temple, killed a lot of people, and sent others off to live in foreign lands. Then the Babylonians came in and conquered the Assyrians and did it all over again. Around the time that *this* was written, Cyrus, the King of Persia, had just conquered the Babylonians, and he tells the people of Israel, “You can go back home now.” They return to Israel and find that their home has been totally destroyed. Their economy and their way of life has been ruined. They have to rebuild *everything*. It is a *dark* time for Israel.

And it is into that darkness that God says, “Arise (get up) and shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” In the midst of their desolate darkness, God tells them that a time will come when the nations and kings around them who worship other gods will come to them, proclaiming the praise of the Lord. Their *poverty* will be replaced by *wealth* as the nations bring them camels and gold and frankincense. All of the children of Israel who have

been shipped off to live in foreign lands will come home. It's this picture of everything being restored and made whole again. All people – Jews and Gentiles – living life and praising God *together*.

So where we see the light shining and God's glory being revealed in *this* text is that God's light will shine upon Israel in their darkness, restore them and make them whole again, and God's glory will be revealed to the world *through* Israel. People will look at Israel, and they will see the glory of God.

Then we get this story of the wise men coming to Jesus in Matthew's gospel. This word that we read as "wise men" is the Greek word *magoi* (or Magi), and it refers to Zoroastrian priests from Persia. They were the scholars of their day, skilled in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. And being from *Persia* means that they were from the same area that had conquered Israel during Isaiah's time.

So now their former conquerors are coming to them, following the light of a star, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; falling to the ground and worshipping Jesus (our Bibles say "they knelt down and paid him homage," but the Greek is actually much more intense; it literally says, "they fell to the ground and worshipped him."). This is the realization of what Isaiah was talking about, that "nations shall come to you, bringing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praise of the Lord." The *epiphany* here, the *revelation* is that the God of Israel is being revealed to Gentiles, to the *world* through Jesus Christ. What was formerly only known to *Israel* is now known to those *outside* of Israel. This isn't just the *fulfillment* of prophecy; the *end* of what Isaiah was talking about. This is just the *beginning* of all things being restored; all people – Jews and Gentiles – being gathered together and made whole.

So what we see here is light shining from a star, leading the nations to Jesus, and the glory of the Lord being revealed through Christ. First we had light shining on Israel and God's glory being revealed through *them*. Now we have light shining on Christ and God's glory being revealed through *him*.

Then we get to Paul and the Ephesians. The Ephesians are Gentiles – non-Jewish people – who have come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Paul is a Jew who has come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. So here we see Jews and Gentiles living life together and proclaiming the praise of the Lord together in Christ.

Paul writes to them and says, “the *mystery* was made known to me by revelation...In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed.” He's talking about an *epiphany* here. But what is it? What *is* this mystery that he's talking about? What has been *revealed* and *made known*? He says the mystery that has been revealed is that “Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus.” Those who were *outside* of God's promise have now been brought *in* to God's promise. Those who were *excluded* are now *included*. Those who were far off have been brought near. It's the continuation of this gathering together; restoring and making whole what was once broken and divided.

And Paul actually talks about this very thing earlier in Ephesians. In chapter 2 he says, “you Gentiles were without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. He has made the two groups

into one and has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us, creating in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.” Paul says that this is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God – to gather up all things in him. He’s saying that this has been God’s plan since day one, and now, in Christ, it is happening. And it’s happening, he says, so that *through the church* the wisdom of God might be made known to the world.

So first it was God’s light shining on Israel, and God’s glory being revealed through them. Then it was God’s light shining on *Christ* and God’s glory being revealed through *him*. And now, what we see here, is God’s light shining on the *church* – Gentiles *and* Jews – and God’s glory being revealed to the world through the *church*. That the world looks at them – at *us* – and sees the glory of God; sees that it is possible for people who are *different* to live together as *one* and for *enemies* to live together in *peace*. That from the beginning of time it was God’s plan to gather all people together as one, and that in the *church*, that is exactly what God is doing. The church is meant to be a glimpse of the all-inclusive kingdom of God, where there is room for *all*, *everyone* belongs, and there is enough love and blessing for *everyone*.

So we look at all of this, at these three texts, and maybe the epiphany for us at the beginning of this new year is that in Christ, that which is *broken* is *made whole*. Whether we are talking about the brokenness in our *bodies* (how we experience sickness, pain, disability, and death), the brokenness in our *spirits* (how we experience fear and doubt, depression and despair), the brokenness in our *relationships* (how we experience distance and separation from one another, whether physical or emotional), or the brokenness in our *world* (violence and war, oppression, racial/religious/political discord); however we experience that brokenness, the promise that we have is that God is healing the world, gathering up all these disparate parts to make them *whole* again.

And we may not always be able to *see* that healing taking place. We may be surrounded by such thick darkness of sadness and suffering that we look around us and *that's* all we can see. And so we are invited to come to this table – to be nourished where we are hungry, to be strengthened where we are weak, to touch and taste where our faith fails us – that the glory of God might be revealed to us here, so that we can go out and share it with the world.