

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
January 3, 2010  
Epiphany Sunday  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 60:1-7  
Psalm 72  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12

During the past few weeks as we've had overcast skies and a good deal of rain and snow, I've found myself in a sort of "winter funk," wishing for more sunshine and bluer skies, and wishing for it to stay light longer during the gray winter days.

But this week I read about another place that made me stop and count my blessings. I read about the city of Barrow, Alaska, located at the northern tip of Alaska on the Arctic Sea.

In Barrow, Alaska, when the sun sets on or around November 18, it takes a little vacation. Darkness envelops Barrow for approximately 65 days, and the sun does not appear again until near the 24th of January! When the light finally does reappear, the people of Barrow all gather and enjoy a public celebration of its return.

Wow. Can you imagine living for two full months in darkness? Can you imagine what it would be like to greet the light after being without it for that long?

Many years ago the prophet Isaiah spoke about a similar lack of light. It was a moral and spiritual darkness that had surrounded the people for many years. A

period when God often seemed absent or silent. Into that dark period Isaiah finally said, “Arise, shine. Your light has come.”

As we gather today to celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, we do so because we believe that the birth of Jesus was indeed the coming of the Light into the world.

If Christmas has seen the light of God rekindled in the world, then Epiphany shows that light coming into full view, being seen by others, and casting its brightness upon all people.

Indeed, at the heart of Epiphany is the conviction that in Jesus, God shows himself not just to the Jewish community, but to all the peoples of the world. Our epistle lesson from Ephesians bears powerful testimony to this great mystery, revealing God’s inclusive heart from the very beginning. This is why in some circles Epiphany is also known as the “Gentile Christmas.”

In terms of our marking time through the Church Year, what is happening now is that we are being moved forward rapidly to the beginning of Jesus’ adult life. This coming Sunday (the First Sunday after Epiphany) will focus on the baptism of Christ and the beginning of his ministry. Subsequent weeks will introduce us to the calling of his disciples, his first miracle at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, his first confrontation with religious authorities, and his early teaching and preaching.

The next six weeks (the season after the Epiphany) then are about appearance, visibility, recognition and public action. Having come into the world at Christmas in the form of a newborn baby, God now sets out to challenge and heal the world through the ministry of the adult Christ. The light *of* the world now shines clearly *in* the world, and will become even brighter as Jesus' earthly ministry takes its course through the remainder of the Church Year.

Epiphany, and the season following it, are about the Light of the world coming to us, and our coming to the Light of the world. Matthew is the only Gospel writer to record the story of the Magi and their journey, and the story continues to fascinate us to this day.

It is a story of a guiding star, a dream of warning, a paranoid and bloodthirsty king, and an intricate itinerary. But there is nothing sentimental or nostalgic about it. For it reveals to us that the world into which the Light came was a partly *receptive*, but mostly *hostile*, world.

And indeed, such is the case today. The world in which we live, the world into which the Light comes to us anew, is a partly receptive, but mostly hostile place. Even our own hearts can be a place where there is a mixture of receptivity and rebellion, all at the same time.

But as we contemplate the Epiphany, and as we make our way through this season that follows, the Light of this season will faithfully come to us. The Light

of this season will faithfully shine *upon* us and *within* us. It will illumine us; and it will challenge us. It will comfort us; and it will confront us. It will preserve and protect us; and it will push us out into the darkness.

The poet Christina Rossetti wrote a poem entitled, “Epiphanytide,” which in some ways may be a commentary on Matthew’s story of the Magi and their journey to worship the newborn king.

In ancient times, no one could approach a king unless the king extended his sceptre to that person. If a person approached without the king extending his sceptre, the person would be killed.

Rossetti’s poem, however, offers us wonderful images of a king who extends his sceptre to us, both in his lowly birth and in his death. And it reminds us that the king born in the manger has not come to conquer or subdue us, but to restore us, to renew us, and to set us free. She writes:

*Trembling before Thee we fall down to adore Thee,  
Shamefaced and trembling we lift our eyes to  
Thee:*

*O First and with the last! Annul our ruined past,  
Rebuild us to Thy glory, set us free  
From sin and from sorrow to fall down and  
worship Thee.*

*Full of pity view us, stretch Thy sceptre to us,  
Bid us live that we may give ourselves to Thee:  
O faithful Lord and True! Stand up for us and do,  
Make us lovely, make us new, set us free --  
Heart and soul and spirit -- to bring all and*

*Worship Thee.*

Christina Rosetti (1830-1894)

As we come to the Table this morning, we come with the assurance that Jesus has the power to dispel any area of darkness in our lives and in our world. In him is life, and that life is truly the light of the world. May his love fill our hearts this day, and may his love *in us* transform us so that we shine as lights in a partly receptive, but mostly dark and hostile, world.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.