

## ***SHEDDING LIGHT***

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Bloor Street United Church

Epiphany Sunday – Sunday, January 3, 2010

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*Readings: Isaiah 60:1 – 6; Matthew 2:1 – 12*

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*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you –  
our rock, strength and redeemer. Amen.*

I am daily amazed at how little I know and how fragile that little knowledge is. I remember returning home from my freshman year of school and getting lost in *my own* neighbourhood, because the landmark McDonald's, which acted as my guide post was torn down for renovation. Remarkably, I was lost in my own community, even though technically I knew where I was.

Change of any size or magnitude has the power to shake-up what we think we know. Our knowledge is finite, while our ignorance is infinite (Sir Karl Popper). No matter how enlightened we think we are; we can't fully understand the present and we can't predict the future.

Nevertheless, many of us find comfort in predictability and in *thinking* that we are in control: Math formulas, good recipes, church liturgy, a nagging friend, the laws of physics, or the constellations in the night sky, *generally* predictable and *generally* comforting.

Yet today we hear two epiphany readings that together have the potential to question what we know, and make us (well at least me) uncomfortable.

The gospel story starts with a star that not only rises, but dances across the night sky until it reaches a house in Bethlehem. The movement of this unbelievable star causes a group of Gentile Magi from the East to respond in an *unexpected* way; a long trip to Jerusalem (perhaps a 40 day journey depending on where they are coming from), with only the guidance of this star (no map), to pay homage to the babe *they believe* caused it to rise.

Magi's, in the times of Ancient Persia and Babylon, were a 'priestly-type' group of Gentiles whose interdisciplinary work included: astrology, astronomy and dream interpretations. Therefore, the Magi are the characters in this story who would be most perturbed by a dancing star!

King Herod is also perturbed, not at the dancing star, but at the Magi's interest and reaction. He decides to call in the local experts to explore if there is really anything to worry about. The experts quote Micah 5:2

*"And you Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."*

This is *enough* to not only *worry* the notoriously cruel King Herod, but to also *frighten* him. Guided by the fear of being over-thrown, Herod starts a plot to kill the child, a plot which includes the wise ones leading Herod to the baby Jesus after they have visited.

The wise ones, after doing everything they have set out to do (visit the child, offer gifts and pay homage), are warned in a dream not to be a part of King Herod's plan *and decide to return home on another road*. [I imagine that this decision came at great personal risk to the Magi; a King who killed two of his sons, numerous relatives and one of his wives, would not have a problem killing a few Magi.] Yet the Magi decided to follow a warning from a dream and go down a different, unpredictable path.

We do not know where that path led for the Magi, but we do know that it was a life-giving path. It was the path that saved the life of the babe who would grow to be Jesus the Christ, and therefore, it is the path that has allowed us to know and be transformed by the ministry and teachings of Jesus.

Our second Epiphany reading is the passage from Isaiah.

Epiphany means, 'revelation, manifestation, or unveiling', (Bill Kervin). During the Magi's adventure, it is assumed that *something is revealed about the mystery of God to the Magi*, which is why they follow the star at its rising and why at the end they choose the life-giving path. It is also assumed that the Magi's adventure *unveil the fulfillment of prophecy*, as Isaiah foretold it.

**Arise, Shine; for your light has come** – it's a star  
**And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you** – it's the baby Jesus  
**Nations (or Gentiles) shall come to your light** – it's Magi from the east  
**They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord** – the Magi come bearing gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh

There is clearly a link between the Isaiah and Matthew passages, *but I do not think* that it is the link of a fulfilled prophecy. The link seems more connected to *what Jesus brings* (then and now) *and what the people need*; (the people being ...)

- the Israelites in exile that Isaiah writes to,
- the early Jewish and Gentile Christians that Matthew writes to and
- the modern day post-Christendom Christian living in a post-modern world:

All need Hope. Jesus is the fulfillment of hope, promised to all people and all nations. This hope is represented by light.

In the traditional interpretations, the goal of the light (and of our epiphanies) is to overcome the darkness (here darkness has a negative connotation):

Arise, Shine for your light has come  
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
And thick darkness the peoples  
But the Lord will arise upon you,  
And his glory will be seen upon you.

Rarely, do I see the charge to embrace the darkness in interpretations of Epiphany texts. As the poet Ollie Miller puts it:

“Darkness needs not to be overcome;  
But revered as holy time  
To feel, to listen, to smell, to look at.  
For in darkness lies the essence of hope.”

This is not a Pollyanna – ism; darkness is not needed because it allows the light to shine brighter. Nor is this darkness meant to represent our grief, sorrow, fear, anxiety or evil. But if the Isaiah passage is a glimpse of our future hope and promise, would

that not imply that we too, (along with the early Christians of Matthew) are in a time of thick darkness – and (in my interpretation) thick darkness isn't a bad thing – it is simply what it is; the absence of light and a constant humble reminder that we look at the world through glasses dimly lit.

*We cannot presume to understand the workings of our world*, the why, how or what – just when we think we have it figured out: a star moves out of place in the night sky, a scientific discovery is made, or a landmark McDonald's is torn down.

*We cannot fully see where we are going either*, we are constantly called to discern our reactions to the unexpected, every year brings us new surprises, some welcomed and some not. We can only rely on inconstancy. And this is not a comfortable realization.

Thankfully, **we can rely on the knowledge that to God, light and dark are alike**; they are both the same to God.

Choosing to embrace the darkness is choosing to embrace a path that only God alone can see. It is choosing to embrace the hope of the darkness with faith, and like the wise ones choosing to embrace the darkness is choosing to allow God through Jesus, to be our guiding star on this journey.

It is not an easy path, but I believe that it is the path of faith. And faith, according to Hebrews is **“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”** (Hebrews 11:1).

Let us pray:

*Prepare us God, to welcome and embrace darkness. Stir our imaginations to honour the dreams that send us in new directions. Give us courage to follow Christ's call to take another road. Amen.*