

Sermon – Epiphany 2022

Rev. Alan Akehurst

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Happy New Year to you all and, although we're four days early, a blessed Epiphany.

The word “epiphany” means a manifestation, an appearing, a revelation, or an insight.

In liturgical terms, of course, it commemorates the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Just as the Magi needed the light of the star in the darkness to lead them to the presence of the Christ child, an epiphany other than a mental one needs light to be seen. Even in comic drawings, a mental epiphany is depicted by the image of a light bulb, and we speak of someone who finally gets the truth of something as having seen the light.

The Holy Scriptures are full of references to light, especially at the opening of the book of Genesis as we hear of God's creation of the first day:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.

In the prologue of the Gospel of John, that light now becomes a reference to Christ as the Word.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Notice that in both passages, there is darkness. As we look back on the past year and even forward in this new one, it's not hard to see the darkness. The Covid pandemic is global. Wars and oppression continue to create refugees around the world. Climate

change is creating natural disasters even in our own province, with an unusual heat dome this past summer, followed by fires (one of which destroyed the town of Lytton), and then by floods which devastated Merritt and Princeton. We continue to see homelessness in our communities. And even if we personally escaped the worst of those hardships, we may have our own personal troubles to deal with, be it the loss of a loved one or illness or some other difficulties. We cope as best we can, knowing that God is with us, sharing our suffering and supporting us with the light which the darkness will not overcome.

Last Sunday we lost one of the great lights of the Anglican Communion, Archbishop the Most Reverend Desmond Tutu. In his writings he put it this way: "Dear Child of God, I am sorry to say that suffering is not optional."

In his book *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Archbishop Tutu said:

"Dear Child of God, I write these words because we all experience sadness, we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in the world will ever end. I want to share with you my faith and my understanding that this suffering can be transformed and redeemed. There is no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now--in our personal lives and in our lives as nations, globally. ... Indeed, God is transforming the world now--through us--because God loves us."

He defines hope as follows: "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." But being able to see the light does not lead to change. Revelation requires action as the Magi showed by their willingness to undertake a long journey from their homeland to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem.

One example of Desmond Tutu's action and leadership in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa occurred when he was Archbishop of Cape Town. My thanks to the Reverend Canon Anne Privett for posting this on Facebook.

Everyone gathered at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, and as they did troops massed by the hundreds outside to intimidate and threaten. Finally some of the troops came inside where they lined the walls, writing down and taping everything Archbishop Tutu said. But he stood up boldly to preach. And that's when he must have sensed the presence of God and the boldness of the one who was always out before him, and he stood and proclaimed that the Apartheid would not endure, as the troops jotted down every word, and in one extraordinary moment he pointed his finger at those who standing along the walls of his sanctuary, and said, "You are powerful. You are very powerful, but I serve a God who cannot be mocked." Then he flashed his wonderful smile and said, "So, since you have already lost – since you have already lost – I invite you today to come and join the winning side

And at that the congregation erupted. It was if the Ark of the Covenant itself was right in their midst, right in the center of the room. And you know what they did: they began dancing. Dancing in the church and then pouring outside and dancing in the streets. Jim Wallis, who was there observing this remarkable moment, said it was astounding. The government troops just moved back because in Wallis' words, "No one had any idea what to do with dancing worshippers."

Such action comes about because of a deep trust in the Divine, a recognition that the Light of Christ will sustain us even in the most trying times. The most notable images of Archbishop Tutu always show his irrepressible smile, as though whatever troubles may surround him, he knows the joy of God's love that empowers him to carry on.

Isaiah's words in the first reading call us to "Arise and shine", not just to see the light but to reflect it. We are all invited to shine in the darkness. Remember how a candle is presented to the newly baptised person or to the godparents with the words: "Receive the light of Christ to show you have passed from darkness to light." And we all responded: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

As Dr. Bonnie Henry said in a press briefing, when declining to apologize for the additional restrictions ordered last week, "Hope is not a strategy." We are called to take action to do our part, not just in relation to the pandemic and the provincial health orders, but in all areas of life where we can act to aid those in need, even if it is as simple as being present to someone who needs to be heard. Many of you may

recognize one of my favourite sayings, attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the Gospel always, use words if you must." Archbishop Tutu put it this way: "Do a little bit of good wherever you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world." In that way we shine the light of God's love to all around us and in so doing make the world a better place not just for them but for ourselves as well.

For the Light of God's love in the revelation of the infant Jesus, thanks be to God.