

“For the sake of the world”

January 6, 2008

Text: Matthew 2:1-12, Ephesians 3:1-12

I.

Today is **Epiphany**, a Christian festival celebrating the manifestation of the *divine nature* of Christ to the Gentiles, as represented by the **Magi**—the famous *wise men* from the east referred to in Matthew’s nativity story.

As it turns out, the energy of this *divine nature*—the divine nature of Christ—has been reaching out to the ends of the earth since the dawning of creation. It’s the radiance of God, the shining of God’s soul onto creation.

This same image of God’s radiant face is mediated by the priests upon the Israelites, at God’s command through Moses, in **Numbers 6**; it’s seen in the **Psalms** as well. You’ll recognize the **Numbers 6** reference:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

This is perhaps the most common benediction used in Christian worship.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

I announce these hallowed words at the close of every wedding and every Funeral or Memorial Service that I do.

When the Lord’s face shines upon you, it’s a blessing. You’re blessed. It’s an affirmation—again and again—that your life is something special.

This radiance is captured, also, in the *star in the east* that the **Magi** saw in its rising.

Epiphany is this *shining*—the shining of God’s nature; the shining of the star of the Christ child, reaching out ... **for the sake of the world**. Its intent, its purpose, is to draw all people in.

II.

The first Sunday of the New Year is a good time to celebrate **Epiphany**. Typically, around New Years, we think of new beginnings ... and often times we make resolutions of positive changes we hope to make in our lives.

We make resolutions to eat better, get more consistent exercise, and spend more time, perhaps, with our spouse, children or parents.

Sometimes our resolutions relate to God—always a good thing; wanting more of God in our lives, a closer walk with God and a deeper sense of God’s presence in our lives.

With all of our resolutions in the works, we’re going need all the help we can get, no doubt; and so what better time to be reminded of God’s love ... and how *God makes his face to shine upon us* ... upon every human being!

You see, God never stops hoping and yearning for the well being of every human person. It’s like *that’s God job* ... that’s what God does. God hopes and yearns for a better day. Tirelessly, God works redemptively in each of our lives, taking whatever we make of things and using it for good.

And God’s undying hope, of course, is that we find ways of getting along. It sounds so simple: we have to love one another.

- We don’t have to like one another; we have to love one another.
- We don’t have to agree with one another; we have to love one another.
- We don’t have to have a good *vibe* with one another, or good *chemistry*, or a good *connection*; we have to love one another.

Indeed, it *is* simple; but it’s also hard ... because we’re different ... and we tend to prefer people like ourselves. *Loving our neighbor as ourselves*, the **Golden Rule** of our faith, is always a steep hill to climb.

And so on **Epiphany**, we celebrate the *shining* of God’s face upon the world ... and how the shining of the star points to the holy birth at Bethlehem ... and how the *divine nature* of this holy birth is indeed **for the sake of the world**.

And that’s GOOD NEWS. **Epiphany** reminds us that the love of God and the compassion of God’s Christ reaches out to everybody ... and seeks to draw all people in.

III.

In **Ephesians**, this *shining* is referred to as a mystery and becomes, for Paul, *the mystery of the CHRIST*.

The *mystery* is that the Gentiles, too, are fellow recipients of God’s grace; members of the same body, sharers in the same promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

What this meant for these early Christians, and what it means for us too, is that God’s grace is for all—**equally** and without reference to **national, racial or social identity**.

The *shining* of Epiphany, to reiterate, is **for the sake of the world**. It's a celebration of the universal character of God's grace. This grace is always a *word* against any form of extremism, or fundamentalism, or fanaticism ... in any religion or ideology.

This grace is welcoming, accepting, understanding and forgiving of everyone. It makes no distinctions. Every human being, in every nation or ethnic group, is a child of the One God who is Creator of us all.

Simply put: God loves us and God wants us to love one another. And the truth is, over the centuries, we haven't been very good at it ... and so God comes to us in Jesus, whose nature and way is the way of *suffering/ sacrificial love*.

And to make sure we get it, God claims Jesus' own life and death on a cross as **God's very own life**.

That's heavy stuff. And that's why we ask, all the time, *What would Jesus do?* In our interactions with others—at home, at work, in community—wherever it is, *what would Jesus do?* We ask the question because *what Jesus would do* reflects God's purposes.

And **Epiphany** reminds us ... it's **for the sake of the world**.

IV.

And so, always, it comes down to: *What are we gonna do?* It's on us. God has loved us in Christ ... and it's an uncontainable love that draws all people in.

You see, part of what's going on in our human situation as people of faith, is that we have two contrary natures working against each other.

On the one hand, there is God ... and the essential character of God's grace accepts and welcomes everybody.

On the other hand, there's us—us human beings. And our natural tendency is to look out solely for ourselves. We're naturally self-centered, self-focused, and looking out for #1. We have to be seriously reminded, prompted, exhorted, and even legislated against in order to move beyond ourselves.

But, HEY, we're Christians ... which means, the gospel has been preached to us. We've been **baptized**. Which means we're disciples of Christ. And let's tell the truth: it's not good enough to hide behind our casual affirmations ... you know, how *we believe in God and we believe in Jesus*.

People, in and out of the church, say that all the time. But there's more.

More, because we're *disciples of Christ*. And there are clear expectations of discipleship. We're supposed to *pick up our cross* and follow him. Matthew, Mark and Luke say this over and over.

And of course, the *way of the cross* is the *way of sacrificial love*.

1. We gotta give up stuff—plain and simple—for love's purposes. We gotta give up time ... and comfort ... and convenience ...
2. We gotta go the second mile, for love's purposes.
3. We gotta forgive and turn the other cheek, for love's purposes.
4. We gotta be peacemakers in all things—again, for love's purposes.

V.

This love invites us, every day, to embrace the BIG PICTURE of our lives ... which asks us each one to STOP, LOOK and LISTEN ... and begin to look at life from the point of view of the other person.

Like our parents, perhaps, or our brothers and sisters ... our other family members ... our friends ... the people down the street. The kids at school or the neighbors that we don't like ...

And all the people who are different from us in whatever ways. People who vote differently from us ... who worship differently from us ... who add and subtract differently from us ... whatever it is. People on the other side of the border ... the other side of the fence.

And why? Again, **for the sake of the world.**

We have to make sacrifices ... show a big spirit ... share our abundance ... seek to find common ground; remembering, all along, that God's blessing is upon us all.

*May the Lord bless you and keep you ... It's for all people ... **for the sake of the world.***

*The Lord make his FACE to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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