

“Follow the Light”

Matthew 2:1-14

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A country boy went to visit a friend in New York City. It was about noon and they were downtown by Times Square in Manhattan. The streets were filled with people. Cars were honking their horns, sirens were wailing, and the sounds of the city were almost deafening. The country boy said, “I hear a cricket.” His friend said, “You have got to be kidding. You couldn’t possibly hear a cricket with all this noise.” The country boy listened again and said, “Yes I’m sure of it. I hear a cricket.” The two boys listened very carefully for a moment and then the country boy walked across the street to a big cement planter where some bushes were growing. He looked into the bushes and sure enough there was a cricket there. “That’s incredible,” said the city boy. “You must have super-human ears.” “No.” said the country boy. “My ears are no different than yours. It all depends on what you are listening for.”

We live in a fallen world with plenty of shadows, gloom, and darkness. We also live in a world that is in the process of being redeemed and illumined. If you strive to perceive God, you will sense God’s light shining everywhere. If you look for God, even in the darkest situations, you will experience God’s radiance.

Today is Epiphany Sunday. The term epiphany means "to show," "to make known," and "to reveal." Epiphany is the celebration of the Wisemen bringing gifts to the Christ child, who by so doing "reveal" Jesus to the world as Lord, King, and the true light of the world.

Perhaps our familiarity with the story causes us to skim over the dark parts. The Wisemen and their families have been studying the prophets, stars, and praying for generations. They finally see a star and believe that Jesus is born. They liquidate their assets, utilize their savings, borrow money, get donations, and invest it all in a trip to go worship Jesus, to present Jesus with gifts. They say goodbye to their family and friends, not knowing if they will see them again, to embark on their long, arduous, dangerous, dark journey to find Jesus. Despite their maps, wisdom, resources and astronomy they are lost, so lost, that these men ask for directions. Herod wants to kill them and soon will slaughter all the children in the region under 2 years of age. Despite the suffocating darkness the Wisemen strain to keep following the light. We know more of the story – that all darkness will be overcome by God’s light radiating through Jesus. Epiphany reminds us that our darkness will be dispersed by God’s light. Epiphany reminds us that even in our darkest situation if one strives to perceive God, one will always find God.

Matthew 2:1-14 NLT “Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote: ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’” Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back

and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!” After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Jesus. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,”

The light of the Kingdom of Heaven broke into our world when Jesus proved God loves for you and me by being born in Bethlehem. Jesus shined light wherever he went. Just a touch of Jesus’ robe or a word from Jesus healed people, making them whole. Jesus didn’t merely call people to get straightened-up so that they could fly off to heaven when they died. The good news that Jesus preached is that light, the Kingdom of heaven, in the person of Jesus, had broken in—a new reality is coming to the forefront. Jesus saw heaven not as being far away; but rather at hand, active, working, engaging, breaking into human history. What we do today matters—for we are called to be agents of the in breaking of heavenly light. Jesus has commissioned us to live a new reality—a heavenly, God ordained reality, seeing God’s light not up somewhere but seeing God at work here and now. Epiphany—God revealing Godself to us. Jesus dispersing the darkness with the radiant light of heaven. We are called to share the light. Carl Henry said, “The divine mandate is to beam light, sprinkle salt, knead leaven into an otherwise hopeless world”

Please give yourself an Epiphany checkup. Spend some time reflecting back over the past year. Where did you experience God? What were your high points and how was God present in them? During your high times, when you felt closest to God, what was happening? Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing? Now look forward to this year. How can you cultivate your relationship with God? Where and how will you look for God? Can you spend more time being and doing that which shined with God’s blessings? How will you spend time with the people who illumined you? Be guided by your past epiphany moments as you plan your future.

What were your low points? When did God seem far off? Always remember that nothing can separate us from the love of God. God’s light is always shining. So when we perceive that God is distant, that all is dark, it is our perception that is distorted for in reality God is always with us. Sometimes our low points are sins or temptation that we should strive to avoid. Other times our low points have to do with circumstances. Keep searching until you see God’s light even in the low dark areas of your life. Get help. Ask God to reveal God’s self more bluntly, to help you see how God is loving you into glory. If you are still lost, learn from the Wisemen, stop and get directions from others, here at church, a friend, family, a spiritual director or myself.

How do you train yourself to perceive God? Pastor John Ortberg writes, “Imagine a group of people coming to your home and interrupting your Twinkie-eating, TV-watching routine with an urgent message: Good News! We’re from the United States Olympic Committee. We have been looking for someone to run the marathon in the next Olympics. We have statistics on every person in the entire nation on computer. We have checked everybody’s records—their performance in the president’s physical fitness test in grade school, body type, bone structure, right down to their current percentage of body fat. We have determined that out of two hundred

million people, you are the one person in America with a chance to bring home the gold medal in the marathon. So you are on the squad. You will run the race. This is the chance of a lifetime. You are surprised by this because the farthest you have ever run is from the couch to the refrigerator. But after the first shock passes, you are gripped by the realization of what's happening in your life. You picture yourself mingling with the elite athletes of the world. You allow yourself to imagine that maybe you do have what it takes. At night you dream about standing on the podium after the race and hearing the national anthem, seeing the flag raised and bending low to receive the gold medal. You begin to feel a sense of urgency. It will be your body wearing those skimpy racing shorts, with a billion people watching on television. But greater than an external pressure is the internal drive that says, 'This is the race I was created to run. This is my destiny. This is why I was born. Here's my chance!' This race becomes the great passion of your life, it dominates your mind. It occupies every waking moment. To run the race well becomes the central focus of your existence. It is what gets you out of bed in the morning. It is what you live for. It is the chance of a lifetime. Then it dawns on you: Right now you cannot run a marathon. More to the point, you cannot run a marathon even if you try really, really hard. Trying hard can accomplish only so much. If you are serious about seizing this chance of a lifetime, you will have to enter into a life of training. You must arrange your life around certain practices that will enable you to do what you cannot do now by willpower alone. When it comes to running a marathon, you must train not merely try. The need for training is not confined only to athletics. Training is required for people who want to play a musical instrument or learn a new language or run a business. Indeed, it is required for any significant challenge in life—including spiritual growth. There is an immense difference between training to do something and trying to do something.”

There are many ways and resources to help you in your training to follow the light of Jesus – transforming you so you can share the light in all you do. A couple of classics would be to read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life together & Prayerbook of the Bible* or Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.” Richard Foster wrote, “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people or gifted people, but for deep people. The classical disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths.” Foster defines classical disciplines as practices that are central to experiential Christianity. A more modern guide would be John Ortberg's “*The Life You've Always Wanted Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People.*”

A month ago I celebrated the life and resurrection into Life Triumphant of my spiritual director, John Ackerman. One of his favorite scriptures is **Matthew 6:34 MSG “Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now.”** John invited others to Stop, Look, and Listen every day. John was always asking. Where is God in that? What is God inviting you to be or do?

Pastor Kara Root invites us to reflect on each day with two questions. How did God surprise you today? Who did God show you who needed kindness today?

How will you train yourself to perceive God? An Epiphany checkup, high/low prayer, God sighting questions, centering prayer, reading scripture, worship, serving, journeying a labyrinth, mission work, prayer, stewardship, loving, bible study, doing what fills you with joy, offering, rejoicing, devotionals, living abundantly, hoping, Christian fellowship, resting, something else.

Epiphany—God shining in our life. Please share God's light. Be intentional in perceiving God's light. Boldly follow God's light. Tune your life to receive the light of heaven. Amen.