

"Stepping into the Light." Is. 60:1-6; Ps. 72:1-7, 10-14; Mt. 2:1-12
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
Epiphany Sunday, January 4, 2009

We just got back from visiting family in Pennsylvania and New York City. Our son, Micah, has been playing in the pit orchestra for "White Christmas" and we saw it last Tuesday night.

Many of us are familiar with the Bing Crosby & Danny Kaye movie. The stage version was slightly different with more of Irving Berlin's songs and a few plot twists. But, basically it was the same show and it was on Broadway, and our son was in the orchestra, so basically we were on "cloud nine" which meant we didn't need seats: we just floated somewhere over the balcony the whole time.

It was beautiful show and it was awesome to watch how smoothly the scene changes occurred and the way they used the light to set the mood and to hide things they didn't want us to see.

The actors depend on the light, of course, and the guys with the "follow spotlights" often had their work cut out for them keeping the dancers in the light.

Having been on stage "a time or two" I can vouch for the fact that you quickly develop a sense of where the light is and where it isn't. Even when it seems as though you are in the middle of the light, there are "hot" spots and "cold" spots. You learn to adjust your position to take advantage of the light.

If you aren't in the light, you might as well not be on stage. No one can see you. All the hard work you put into the production quickly becomes wasted effort if you don't pay attention to the light.

All this talk about light translates into the gospel we are called to proclaim. Today is Epiphany Sunday, the day on which we remember the arrival of the magi to the Manger in Bethlehem.

Led by the light of the star they journeyed many miles, convinced that the light would guide them to the birthplace of the King. And they were right.

Epiphany means "manifestation" or "showing". It's like turning on a spotlight to reveal an actor on the stage. Jesus, the Light of the World, has come and the star and the angels, the prophecies and the promises all point to him just like a spotlight points to the star on center stage.

Jesus has that unique quality of being the lead actor on the center stage of human history and also the Light at the same time. He invites us to draw near, to hear his story and to follow him and to become so accustomed to the Light he brings that we, in a sense, live in it.

However, we know there are many who turn from the light, many who do not recognize it as anything special, many who prefer the darkness of their own thoughts, their own attitudes and behaviors. It is a mystery why some come to the light while others do their best to keep their distance.

What makes the difference? Why do some have an "epiphany", an "a-ha" moment that causes their lives to change while others remain indifferent?

This is a season of change, a time when formerly impossible things become possible. Recently the Center for the Arts presented the musical "Scrooge", with its retelling of the famous story of how Ebenezer "saw the light" and changed his ways.

What got to him? Was it his friend and partner, Jacob Marley, come back from the dead to warn him? Was it the three ghost visitors of Christmas Past, Present and Future? Was it his own conscience being reawakened to remember that he was part of human society and meant for more than just accumulating profits?

Was it the indefatigable good will of his nephew or the quiet perseverance of Bob Cratchitt? We don't know exactly what made the difference, but we do see the results of the changes he made in his life.

In the same way, unless we have an in-depth conversation with someone, we probably won't know "the half of it" in terms of how their faith in Christ has played out in their life. All we will have is the evidence of their behavior - their attitude toward others, the causes they supported, the things to which they gave their heart and their passion. We may be lucky enough to hear from them about their own journey from darkness into light, their personal struggle to step into the Light and be counted as one of the key players in the cause of Christ.

But even if we don't know everyone's story, we can still remember the witness of the Scripture to the story of our faith and to those who came from afar to the Light of God's Love in Christ. We will see those whose journeys are part of our journey and whose lives are intertwined with ours. And we can be grateful that we have others surrounding us who are helping to point the way to the Light.

But pointing to the light and taking the steps toward it are two very different things. Many of us are good at standing on the sidelines, staying out of the way of the other actors on the stage, not wanting to have the light shine too brightly on us for fear that we may “mess up” or forget our lines or annoy others if we start talking too loudly about justice and mercy and God’s love for all.

Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer and poet, has written much on the connection between our values and our lives. One of his poems was written to his granddaughters who visited the Holocaust Museum on the day of the burial of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. He writes:

“Now you know the worst we humans have to know about ourselves, and I am sorry, for I know that you will be afraid.

“To those of our bodies given without pity to be burned,
I know there is no answer but loving one another, even our enemies,
And this is hard.

“But remember: when a man of war becomes a man of peace,
he gives a light, divine though it is also human.

“When a man of peace is killed by a man of war, he gives a light.

“You do not have to walk in darkness.
If you will have the courage for love, you may walk in light.

“It will be the light of those who have suffered for peace.
It will be your light.” (A Timbered Choir, p. 192).

What will it take for us to step further into the Light in this New Year and be seen more fully as a follower of the Light of the World?

There is plenty of darkness surrounding us and there is plenty of bad news and gathering gloom to cause despair and frustration and fears to arise.

But to counter the daily realities of our lives we have the life of the Spirit and the voice of Scripture crying out: "Arise, Shine! For your Light has come!" We have the Prince of Peace who calls us to be peacemakers in his name. We have a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, encouraging us to be the people God created us to be: People of the Light, not of the darkness, People who have the courage to love and to reach out to others with the love that God has poured into the world.

Step into the Light! Live as those who know that "Hope", "Peace", "Joy" and "Love" are more than just words that look good on stained glass. They are defining qualities in the lives of those who live in the Light of Christ.

May this be the year in which we come alive and claim more fully our calling as people of the Light.