

“A New Day Is Here!”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Epiphany Sermon
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Today, Epiphany, is all about the light. We are led in by the prophet in Isaiah telling us, “Arise! Shine! For your light has come! And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!”

Then, scripture turns our attention to the wise men, whose attention is on the light of a certain bright star-- indeed, the star that would lead them to Bethlehem, where they find and pay homage to the Christ child.

Epiphany-- which we can define as “an illuminating discovery” --invites us to be washed in light as we also discover the Christ born among us.

We Christians in the organized church are asked to make this discovery again and again, year after year. Christmas just about gets handed to us when we turn the calendar page to December 25-- we don't have to wander and read the skies and interpret dreams and discover like the magi did.

But what if we allowed a little wandering, and wondering, to happen? We are so focused on the human and divine aspects of the Christmas story. But what if we are to look even bigger than that? In both Matthew and Luke, the gospels show us that more is happening than on a human and divine scale. Luke has animals-- sheep, donkey, and whatever else might be in that stable where Jesus was born. Matthew has the star in the sky, pointing to something happening on a cosmic scale. This year, Christmas hung in the balance of Saturn lining up with Jupiter on December 21-- the Winter Solstice. I saw it glimmering in the early night sky, giving hope to the longest night. Then a few days after Christmas, we had a series of bright moons, with the full moon hovering above us Tuesday night. Christmas was cradled by cosmic light. Nature, I know, invites fear in us too. Living under a pandemic we barely understand, we know how vulnerable nature can make us feel. But we can still be in awe and wonder that God is as transcendent as the cosmic light of planets dancing in each other's pathways, and as earthy and near as the sweet, grassy, manure smell of wooly sheep. I suspect God's redemption is not just for humans, but is for the whole cosmos, and every natural thing within it. If God stretches across those extremes, surely God can be with us too. Looking with wonder at the natural world and the cosmos, we are more likely to discover God there.

To wander until we see the dawn of a new day, as the Magi did upon finding the Christ child, takes some creative maneuvering. Some say that the magi-- or wise men-- or 3 kings-- as the many different traditions have called them-- were astronomers coming from the East, from Persia. They could read the sky and find cosmic meaning there, in the stars. I have deep respect for that, although I missed my chance at finding such meaning in the skies. I had saved

my last science requirement for college for my senior year. I thought I was set-- I was going to take Astronomy with Dr. De Pree. He was known for being one of the best educators among professors in my college. However, the first night of the semester, I found myself sitting in the observatory with an adjunct filling in-- it turned out Dr. De Pree was on sabbatical, and I was with someone who filled me with confusion rather than enlightenment. I made a passable grade, but ever since, when I have anxiety dreams, it is because I have been told that I did not in fact pass college astronomy and I have to retake my final exams, 20-something years later.

There are worse dreams one could have, I suppose. We know that Joseph had a dream, shortly after the magi continued on their way, that Herod was coming after them and seeking to destroy Jesus. Warned from his dream, Joseph and Mary took the child into Egypt, where they sought refuge until Herod's death. Still, in a maniacal rage, Herod ordered all the infants born in and around Bethlehem killed. They had left the realm of dreams, and entered the realm of nightmares.

And yet, Epiphany finds us at a new day.

Getting to that new day sometimes requires some creative maneuvering. An angel warned the magi about Herod's rage, and so they took a different pathway home, to avoid giving any kind of information to Herod. Their creative maneuvering protected the baby Jesus. As we look toward the light at the end of the tunnel with the hope that vaccines will lessen the burden of this pandemic, we have to be open to doing creative maneuvering. We have had and will have rulers who, like Herod, act out their programs of greed and violence. We have to find creative ways of resisting them, as the magi did. The systems already in play may not work for us; they certainly do not work for those who live at the margins: the poor, the forgotten, the despised. We might have to share wealth in different ways. We will need to look at healthcare and healing in different ways-- certainly, this pandemic has exposed how poorly our medical system treats its sick and those who care for them. I sometimes wonder if Jesus' deep focus on healing the sick came because his heart was broken open at the number of babies Herod killed in his rage at Jesus' birth. Coming from a time of such death, Jesus brought forth changes that would offer life. I hope that we, too, after knowing that 350,000 and counting have died in this country due to COVID-19, we will use some creative maneuvering and put forth an agenda that cares for life at all levels.

But it is hard to see our way out of the place of loss and death we are in right now. We wonder, is there really light at the end of this tunnel?

Getting to that new day requires faith when light is in short supply.

On Tuesday, we decided, last minute, to take a hike. Since Kai had a violin lesson until noon, we only had the second half of the day. Still, we invited our friends who lived nearby to join us. Getting two households organized, out the door, and to the Delaware Water Gap where the trailhead waited took some time, but by 2:30 pm we were standing at the base of Mount Tammany, choosing between 2 trails: the blue trail, which was a gentle slope that had a waterfall view half a mile in, or the red trail, which went straight up the mountain, included some

boulder scrambles, and had the most amazing views from the top. The two trails connected at the top, and the park's recommendation was to climb the red trail, and take the easier hike down the blue trail. One person in our group suggested we take the easier blue trail to the waterfall, pose for some pictures, then return to the parking lot. But I gently encouraged them, "Come on, we drove all this way, we might as well go to the top!" So, they followed my lead up the red trail. Suddenly I felt responsible for everyone's welfare, since they were following *my* suggestion. I asked some returning hikers how long this red trail took. "45 minutes!" they told us.

Well, turns out those hikers didn't have a puppy with them who wanted to explore everything. They also did not have a 6-year old and an 8-year old, who wanted to scramble up every boulder, and required multiple snacks along the way. And, if I'm really honest, the three adults on the hike-- each in our mid-40's-- making a vertical climb in facemasks, required lots of chances to catch our breath, too.

We had been hiking for over an hour, and after yet another chorus of "are we there yet" rang out, I stopped a hiker coming down-- at that point, we were seeing few of them-- and asked him how much further from the summit. "I don't know, about 45 minutes?" he ventured. "You might want to go back down this way you came, so you don't get stuck up there in the dark."

I did some rough calculations in my head. 45 minutes later, it would be 4:15--- assuming we were as fast as this hiker; with his retractable hiking stick and beard, he seemed like a serious one. Sunset-- was it supposed to be 4:30? 4:45? I wasn't sure. The headlamp I had suggested to bring, Chris had said was too much extra to carry, so I had left it in the car. We had plenty of snacks, but the kids were starting to get cold. I hadn't even told them about the bears and rattlesnakes the trail descriptions I had read on the internet had warned about...

Even though I wanted to see the summit, I asked our group if they thought we should turn back. "No way," Chris said, "We've come this far. I want to see what's at top." And she provided the spirit that stopped children's whining and gave us all the optimism we needed to get to the top-- which, it turned out, was only 15 minutes away, not 45. And the view was spectacular, with the lowering sun sparkling on the Delaware river below us and the mountains around us turning purple as they shadowed. We even made it to see the waterfall on the way down before it grew dark. Though the sunlight had completely disappeared before our trail ended, the moon was a bright, full moon. We were all filled with wonder at the nature we had seen-- an antidote to the false light of computer screens we had each spent too much time in front of. We were all glad for the path we had chosen, and for the collective faith that got us up and down the mountain.

Now, I am not saying that you should gamble your chances when facing nature and all it can do. Respect nature and its power. But remember, too, that the magi did not travel alone. If you can find for yourself a community where among you together, there is just enough faith, you will make it through to the light. You may not have enough faith on your own. But if you have a church to wander with you, a group of friends, or even just one person who can say, "We are going to make it through this," chances are, you will make it through-- even if on your own you have your doubts.

I wish I could tell you that the Christmas arrival set our broken world right again. I can't say that. But have courage. God has set light within us, so that we can do that work of love and repair with God. Do not doubt that your own faces already bear God's light. It is hard to see, because we do not see ourselves as God sees us. But God has indeed set that light within us to make us radiant. When we bring forth that light together-- even in virtual ways-- we become brilliant. So, people of God: lift up your eyes, and shine!