

## SERMON- Epiphany (C)

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Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

January 5, 2025

Psalms 72:1-7,10-14

### OPENING:

From the "Prophet" James Taylor, and his song about Epiphany and the Wisemen.

*Yes, they went home by another way  
Home by another way  
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too  
And go home by another way<sup>1</sup>*

Today is Epiphany, and our passage from the Gospel of Matthew ends by saying that *that* is the effect of this burst of light, this earth shattering event of the Birth of Christ, the long-awaited Advent, the coming and Incarnation of Emmanuel.

It's clear the wisemen were scared of Herod, which is one reason why they went "home by another way," but there is something deeper in that verse, the fact that their lives—and yours & mine—were changed, not just geographically, but irrevocably by this Epiphany.

In a moment, you will hear another song from last summer's Vacation Bible School at St. Timothy's, this song echoes, down from the generations, God's song specifically from the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 60.

A song that is telling us to:

"Arise, Shine! For your light has come, the glory of God has come upon you."<sup>2</sup>

Those are the opening lines from our Old Testament reading, they are also some of the opening lines, I am told, of Handel's *Messiah*. Those words, written 500 years before Christ's birth, tell of another Epiphany. In the midst of the exile and devastation, Isaiah records a vision of God's dream for God's people  
When everything looks the worst, Isaiah says THIS is what things will be like.

There is no myrrh in that vision, but there is Gold and there is Frankincense, and there are camels.

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<sup>1</sup> James Taylor *Never Die Young* (1998) <https://genius.com/James-taylor-home-by-another-way-lyrics>

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 60.1

Camels—“the ship of the desert”<sup>3</sup> —would bring wealth into the city so that “The abundance of the sea shall come to you.”

Nothing would ever be the same as peace and prosperity and “The wealth of the nations” would come to Israel.

Let’s watch this video, this Epiphany where Isaiah echoes down to Matthew, and Matthew to us.

**PLAY VIDEO: (one minute, 38 seconds).**

“Arise and Shine with Hope.”

“Arise and Shine with Love.”

“Arise and Shine with Trust.”

That was our Signal Verse, our Scriptural theme all week.

God gives that imperative through Isaiah back then, and he gives it to us today.

Now your first reaction to that video should be:

- 1) those kids are adorable,
- 2) that they are really good at the hand motions, some better than others

But if you come from visiting this scene, if you approach and retreat from that video with only that in mind, you would not have gone “home by another way.”

We all know that Kids are adorable, we know that Vacation Bible School is fun. We even know that Todd Grivetti is a gifted musical educator, that Joanna Smith could present a brilliant program out of thin air, and that we had so many loving parents and grandparents who came to help out and provide care.

You do not need or should not need a sermon from me to tell you that, or a video to prove it.

## **EPIPHANY**

Epiphany is a revelation, it’s a surprise. It’s a “I did not see that coming.”

The wiseman did not come to the Christ Child and find something bound within their scientific knowledge. No, they came and they went “home by another way.”

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<sup>3</sup> Blenkinsopp, Joseph. 2003. *Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (Anchor Bible Commentary Series, Volume 19B, Volume 3.) New York: Doubleday, 212.

It's taken me about 5 months to preach this VBS sermon and I am still grappling with exactly what the Epiphany was.

Again, I know that our children are a delight to spend a week with, but it changed me, and my relationship with this place.

Here are some of the EPIPHANIC moments:

At our VBS,

we had homemade ice cream,

we had a talking parrot named Beacon,

we had a karate demonstration.

We had Bob Beury, Attorney at Law, as a leader of 6-year-olds and they loved him, They called him "Builder Bob."

We had a snack time, which was just goldfish on some blankets in Henry Hall, and, for the kids, it was like eating at a Michelin starred restaurant.

Why and how did all that make it an Epiphany?

I shudder to try to answer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that: "No priest, no theologian stood at the manger of Bethlehem. And yet all Christian theology has its origin in the wonder of all wonders: that God became human..."<sup>4</sup>

With that having been said, here are some attempts to explain:

1) First, VBS, in addition to being fun, is HARD. It's eight hours with 40 some children in the August heat. The old conventional wisdom there is true: what does not kill you only makes you stronger. Scripture reframes that adage. In the Old Testament, if you see God, God's glory, you die. It's so amazing and awesome that Moses has to avert his eyes from the Burning Bush. In the New Testament, it's reversed, but the logic is actually the same. If you know God, you will die and then you will live forever.

*I should probably just stop there but....*

2) Second, here is a point of personal pride. When I interviewed here, and I talked about bringing my family, my then 4-year-old son. The committee said: "That's great, that would double our attendance at Sunday School!" So all week, when Connor Lamb and my son fought, for whatever reason, to be first in line to wherever we were going next.

I said: "Two years ago, only in our wildest dreams, could we imagine having that

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<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich and Jana Riess (editor). 2012. *'God Is in the Manger': Reflections on Advent and Christmas*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox. 28.

problem.” Isaiah predicted it though:

*Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.  
Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,<sup>5</sup>*

3) Third and finally, and I never told Todd this one, Vacation Bible School Music always makes me a little nervous. Children’s Church music can be a little tricky. I was nervous when I learned that the curriculum that we had, the theme was “Arise, and Shine your Light.”

I was worried, and I get paid the big bucks to have these worries, I was worried that the program would all be about how we all have a light inside us and we need to let that light shine. That’s perfectly good self-help talk.

That’s what our culture tells us in mind-numbing fashion.

It’s just not what Isaiah is saying. It’s not *our* light that we are producing, it’s God’s light that shines within us. Do you see the distinction?

We say “I had an epiphany” and it makes it sound like “Oh, now I have figured it out.”

THE Epiphany is the opposite of that.

There is a standard Epiphany sermon out there, you might have heard it... I might have preached it, where the preacher asks, rhetorically, “what gifts can you bring to Jesus?” But guess what, Jesus does not need your gifts.

That’s what the rest of James Taylor’s song is about: how Herod is trying to get the gold, frankincense and myrrh!

## **CONCLUSION:**

In this season of Epiphany, in this the year of our Lord 2025, let’s spend some time looking for Epiphanic Moments, and not just at VBS, or at Shrine Mont, or even at church. Let’s look for those moments where God’s light shines within us.

In conclusion, our children are adorable, hear me on that one!

But our job as the Church is NOT to direct them towards their own interior light, but to God’s light,

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 60.4-5

a light that shines in the darkness, a  
light that cannot be overcome,  
a light for the people of Israel  
and a light for us here in Herndon, Virginia.

A light that will redirect the reality of our lives  
and will make us go “home by another way.”

**AMEN**