

Have You Seen the Light? By Sharon Hammill

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

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Christmas is over or so it seems. The trees have come down in our homes. Christmas vacations are over. The students are beginning to stroll back on campus here at Elon. We are back to our jobs and back to our daily routines without the hustle and bustle of shopping. But wait, we have one more “part” of the Christmas story that we seem to have forgotten. It’s the one about those three “wisemen” or magi or “kings” as they are sometimes referred to. Those men of old that are always part of the Christmas pageants. On December 16th, following taking the baskets to the shut-ins, I ventured to First Christian UCC, my home church, to see the Christmas pageant. I started to say annual, but it really is not. We only have it every two-three years. It takes Jeanne Williams that long to rest up after organizing and directing it. But the story is usually the same. It starts with the prophecy of Isaiah and Micah—the prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. Then of course the Luke story of the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus, in the manger, the shepherds and the angels, and then we come to the passage we are studying today...that of the wise men and their journey to follow the star and find this baby that is predicted to be a king, a king of the Jews. When they find him of course they give gifts and everyone is in the manger scene together...Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, the shepherds, the angels, and the wise men. But is that really how the story goes? I think we might want to take a closer look. It makes a nice Christmas pageant but as Jonathan spoke last week, this is not a pretty story in Matthew if you really sit down and study it. However, today we celebrate “Epiphany.” The word “Epiphany” means to be revealed or manifested. Through this epiphany to the wise men or magi, they saw the light..the light that led them to revelation of a newborn king.

So, I ask you have you seen the light?

Our text today, both the texts from Isaiah and from Matthew deal with this image of light. Isaiah’s text is one of hope for the people of Israel. They have been held captive and Darius, King of Persia, has said that they may return to Jerusalem. Isaiah tells them to “Arise, shine, for your light has come!” God’s glory is with them and other nations will come to see God’s power and glory present in them. In vs. 6, it even makes reference to what appears to be the Magi’s visit when it says “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” Isaiah shows the light of hope, the light of joy, the light of revelation and salvation for the people who have been exiled. He says God will help them rebuild Jerusalem, not by themselves but with the help of others. (Haslem, 1) Isaiah could have asked them “Have you seen the light? Better yet Isaiah, says that from the darkness, the Lord will come out of the darkness and his glory will appear over you. Isaiah proclaims their lights will shine for other nations to see.

As I said earlier, the text in Matthew begins with the story of Herod. Herod is worried that someone is going to come along and take away his throne. Herod is not a nice man. He kills two sons and a wife due to his insecurities. These wise men or magi who were of the Persian caste of astrologers and interpreters of dreams come to Herod concerning a star they have seen, a light in the sky that indicates that a king has been born. Herod wants their help in finding this “king” and he even lies to them about his purpose in finding the child...Herod says that he wants to go and worship him. The magi studied stars and stars were associated with each person. This particular star indicated that a king had been born. It could have been more than a star—it could have been a supernova or a comet or a conjunctions of planets. Whatever the case, in Number 24:17-24 the star is prophesied...”a star shall come out of Jacob, a scepter shall rise out of Israel” and that this ruler will conquer surrounding nations. (Haslem, 3)

So what did this experience do for the magi in our story today? What did the light of star bring them to? Our text today says that they saw the star from the East, and they came to Jerusalem. They went to Herod and asked where to find the child born king of the Jews?” The text says that they entered the “house” with the child and the mother Mary and they bowed down and paid “homage” to him. I guess this where the text gets our Christmas pageant story a little out of whack. If they were in a house, they were no longer in a stable. There is no mention of Joseph, or the animals, or the shepherds or the angels. So, the setting is little different than our original Christmas story. And you know the rest of the story from last week where Herod had every child 2 years or younger killed in hopes of killing this child who was to be King of the Jews. But it was at this house,

at the following of the Star, that brought these Gentiles, not Jews, to come and worship, to reveal to those in other Nations the revelation and manifestation of this newborn king. And not only did they bow down and worship it says that they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gold, frankincense and myrrh. What was the significance of these gifts? Gold of course represented riches and was appropriate to give a king. Frankincense was a spice of prayer which represents his priesthood. The most interesting gift is that of the myrrh. The myrrh was a burial spice...in the song "We Three Kings," it says "Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume, Breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorr'wring, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone cold-tomb." So Matthew also laid out the message from the start of the impending fate of this child. Our passage closes with a dream revealing that they should take another path home and not return to Herod.

So, with all that said, what does the message of Isaiah and of Matthew tell us about light? I ask you again have you seen the light? When I was studying for my message today, Monica asked me early on what my title was going to be. It took a while and this question that I asked you today almost disturbed me. It sounds a little evangelical or charismatic...almost like the question "Have you been saved?" But, I want to put a different twist on this question in relationship to the message of Isaiah and of Matthew. For I think the message puts forth a message of seeing the light, the light of hope, of light of joy, and the light of revelation and salvation.

So I ask you, have you seen the light of hope? As I said earlier, Isaiah in his passage offers this image of light to the Israelites in returning to Jerusalem. They have been exiled, are returning home to find that war has offered destruction, Isaiah describes it as waling in darkness, however, he gives a command to "Rise, Shine, and Lift up your head." In our lives we often face dark times. There are times of hopelessness. There are things in our lives that we feel often that there is no hope. That life has often given us blows that we just cannot face. There are things in our lives that often cause these feelings of hopelessness—a loss of a child, a loss of a job, loss of self-worth, financial difficulties, loneliness, homelessness, hunger. The holidays often bring about more suicides and suicide attempts than any other time of the year. The feeling of hopelessness is especially prevalent at this time of year. It is up to us who live with Christ in us to show to other that light of hope. It is up to us to go out into this world, to be the Isaiah's of this world, to help others' to see the light of the Glory of God that is around us. So I ask you, have you seen that light of hope? Furthermore, I ask you are you willing to share that light of hope with others that are walking in darkness.

Have you seen the light of joy? In our Matthew text today, we have the experience of the wise men and their journey to see Jesus. In vs. 10 Matthew says, "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Then it goes on to say that "they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid homage." Jesus was revealed to them through this light, this star, and they were overwhelmed with joy. Can you think of a time in your life where the light of Christ has been revealed to you and you were overwhelmed with joy? It might be at the birth of a child, or the joy we have just experienced on Christmas morning where the gifts were opened and you see the joy on the face of those who received. It might be the joy you see on the face of a shut-in as you sing Christmas carols to them or present them a basket of homemade cookies and fruit. It might be the smile on the face of someone less fortunate receiving a stack of presents for their children through Christmas Cheer. You see their joy but you too are overwhelmed joy because Christ is revealed and the glory of God is shown all around. So I ask you have you seen the light of joy? Have you been as overwhelmed with joy as the wisemen? Have you seen the light?

On this Epiphany Sunday, have you seen the light of God revealed through his son Jesus Christ? Has the revelation of God through Christ come to you as it did the wise men? Bruce Epperley writes, "Both Isaiah 6 and Matthew 2 call us to consider the relationship of revelation and salvation. If revelation is global, yet varied in form throughout humankind, so, too is salvation must be global and available to person in terms of gifts and insights of their own cultural contexts. Although the magi never adopt, the religion of the Jews, there are surely "saved" for they have seen the radiance of God in the heavens as well as in Mary and Joseph's humble household." (Epperly,1) Epperly goes on to say, "Encountering divine illumination always changes the course of our lives." In relationship to the story of the magi, they are told in a dream not to go back to Herod, but to take another path. So, that is an important thought here. "Encountering divine illumination always changes the course in our lives." I would like for you to think about moments in your lives where you have seen the light of revelation and salvation and how it has changed the course of your life. In my own faith journey, it was the revelation of seeing ministry in a different light that brought me to where I am today. In

helping my husband with his truckstop ministry really was God's way of revealing to me a call that I had been struggling with for a long time. Through helping to minister to truck drivers, through working with youth ministry, and through my studies in the Pastoral Leadership Program, God has been revealed to me in so many ways and has helped me to develop gifts that I did not know that I had. Encountering divine illumination definitely changed the course of my life and has even change my course when I left my home church of 51 years to come here. God reveals himself to us and through Christ has offered us salvation through grace—grace to all.

So I ask you on this Epiphany Sunday. Have you seen the light? Have you seen the light of hope? Have you seen the light of joy? Have you seen the light of revelation and salvation? If you have what are you going to do with the light? Are you going to keep it to yourself or are you going to share the light of Christ with others?

In closing, I would like to share a story that a friend of mine, Phil Bray sent me over the e-mail. It goes like this:

There was a man who took his family to a restaurant. He asked his six year old son to say grace. The six year old said: "God is Great, God is Good, thank him for our food. I pray Mom let's us get ice cream when we finish dinner. Liberty and justice for all. Amen."

Other customers heard the little boy's prayer and laughed. There was a woman at one table who said "That's what is wrong with our country today, kids don't know how to pray. He shouldn't have asked for ice cream."

The little boy started crying when he heard this. He asked his father "Is God mad at me? Did I do something wrong?" His father consoled him and told him he did nothing wrong.

An elderly gentleman came over and said "I happen to know that thought that was great prayer." He whispered. "Besides, ice cream is good for the soul."

When their dinner was complete, the parents bought their children ice cream. The little boy got his and looked at it. He then picked it up, took it to the woman who had been critical and said. "Ice cream is good for the soul and my soul is good."

Out of the mouth of child comes a message of light. It comes from a child and should come from each and every one of us to pass this message on to a hurting world.