

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
The Epiphany
January 2, 2022

The Way, the Truth, and the Light

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

There's a story told of a Hindu speaker invited to give a presentation at an interfaith gathering. Unfortunately, the host pastor preceding him, who was to give opening remarks, was from a very conservative church. His agenda was not interfaith understanding. He was there to prove the supremacy of his Christian faith. He was solely bent on demeaning the other's faith, proving the superiority of his own, rather than entering into any interfaith dialogue. He cared not a whit about the sensitivities of those in the room who were not Christians.

He addressed the crowd reading from one of the most exclusivist passages of the John's gospel. "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me."

What a jerk, many thought. Way to make our guest feel welcome!

Most in the audience were embarrassed by this lack of charity, by this lack of basic manners. Folks sat in their seats in stony silence, glued to their places as interfaith relations were possibly set back hundreds of years. As the guest speaker approached the podium, all wondered how he would respond.

The speaker stepped up and beneficently smiled at his audience. After a pause, he proclaimed, "The pastor is absolutely correct."

"For, what is the way of Jesus, but the way of peace, humility, truth and respect. That is the only way one can approach God, enter into the Holy."

This Hindu man had seen in Jesus that which this pastor failed to register: the Inner Light of God. The speaker had seen the same spiritual luminosity that those Wise Sages saw in that baby's eyes, lying in the poverty of a manger.

Now my wife avers that had those travelers from afar been women, they would have brought more practical gifts: Pampers, Wet Wipes and a copy of Dr. Benjamin Spock's book, ***Baby and Child Care***.

I can still vividly see in my mind's eye a Christmas pageant -- read bathrobe drama -- of a former church wherein the three Wise Men ended up in a giggling heap at the manger. I won't mention who two of those boys were. Those three, afterwards, were known as the Three Wiseguys. But we all remembered the story, to be sure.

Epiphany is all about the Inner Light so luminous that it shines forth in the lives of all who take it in. Shines forth in the lives of all who have been transformed by it. It is also about two forces. Some saw the beauty of holiness and blessing in that child's eyes. Others wanted to snuff that light out. Those two forces are still arrayed against each other to this day.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness will appear over you."

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born to Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'"

We celebrate the Day of Epiphany this Sunday. Yes, I know the real date is January 6th on the Western Calendar. It is the day we celebrate the radical manifestation of the Divine in Jesus. We celebrate a Way that leads into all that is holy and wholesome – Truth, Peace, Generosity, Equity – in short, Holy Spirit Light. That is the gleaming those mystic sages saw in his eyes as they knelt in homage.

Herod and his minions perceived such generosity of spirit as a threat to their power and wanted to extinguish it. We remember the slaughter of the Holy Innocents on December 29th – a slaughter that continues yet to this day in the Middle East, in China and Myanmar. And in the streets of too many American cities.

The Hindu speaker grasped the true reality of Jesus – “Light of Light descending from the realms of endless day,” goes one of my favorite hymns -- “As the darkness clears away.”

About the darkness. Lately, it has seemed overwhelming.

January 6th is the Day of Epiphany. In America it is also a day of deep darkness over our land. A year ago, malignant forces of sedition brought America to one of its darkest hours in recent history. January 6th was definitely not the dawning of the Age of Aquarius for our nation.

The alarming tragedy of that day was that the efforts to extinguish a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” continue to this very day. Snuff out the radiance of Lady Liberty’s torch.

The deep darkness of doubt is cast over our elections. Cries of “Stop the Steal” and “Rigged” course through recent mass rallies, not unlike those seen in Germany in the 30s.

Over seventy percent of one of our two major political parties does not believe in the results of the 2020 election. No. Joe Biden is NOT the legitimate president of the United States. Most of these folks believe that the hearings to investigate the January 6th insurrection are a sham, or if not – in any case, we should just move on. Some things are better left alone.

We now know that over one hundred representatives in Congress were prepared to overturn the counting of the election. If only there had been no riot and if only Vice President Pence had gone along with the scheme.

Yes, many would snuff out the torch of Lady Liberty, but her Lamp by the harbor door will not be extinguished. The call to patriots is still heard and answered. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the lord has risen upon you.”

As Lt. Col. Vindman proclaimed, “Here, Right Matters.” That was the testimony of Fiona Hill and Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch – all who had the courage to stand up, be counted, and testify to the White House corruption they had witnessed.

Despite slurs, lies, death threats and character assassination – all speaking Truth at great risk to their careers and to their very lives. Patriots all. The

very Light as shining forth as from that Epiphany Star. This is the luminous manifestation of our democratic heritage still shining across the land.

They're with Tom Bodett in his commercial for Motel 6, "We'll leave the light on for you." In their patriotic service, they've "left the light on." So must we.

It is still the very Light reflected in the eyes of those three Visitors to a lowly birthplace some two thousand years ago. It is the very light which has inspired the best of who we are – those who scribbled down the promises of the Declaration of Independence, those Abolitionists who stubbornly stood against slavery, Conductors on the Underground Railroad, those Suffragettes struggling for the women's vote, those who marched against senseless and endless wars in the sixties. They are the Light of this nation. The bipartisan January 6th Select Committee is the Light of this nation. Especially the two Republicans, Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger; they have paid the highest price.

Epiphany – on January 6th let us celebrate the manifestation of all that is Holy in our Lord Jesus Christ. And the light that yet radiates from that vision of those wise sages. That same force radiates down through the pageant of history. Lt. Col. Vindman summed it up in his testimony before congress and in his book, *Here Right Matters*.¹ Our Epiphany journey is through the morass of lies and deceit. Not for the fainthearted.

Michael Connelly, through his fictional LAPD detective character, Harry Bosch, puts this life value well. Harry is like a dog with a bone when it comes to pursuing a case. When he's sometimes derided by fellow officers for this stubbornness, his come-back is: "Everybody counts or nobody counts." Doesn't make any difference to Harry whether the victim lives on the streets or in a Westwood mansion.² Everybody counts or nobody counts – that's the truth of the Epiphany star, the Jesus ethic.

This, the message of the inner Light, diffused down through the years in the best of us is still, "Everybody counts." That's the ethic of the Jesus Movement.

Today those same reactions are at war. Trust the Light of Lady Liberty's torch and encourage full participation. On the other hand, fearful voices still seek to stifle such notions.

Senator Rand Paul recently put forth the proposition that an election is stolen just because poor and minority voters are encouraged and organized to go to the polls. Straight out of Jim Crow 2.0. That he has not yet been rebuked

¹ Alexander S. Vindman, *Here, Right Matters: An American Story* (New York: Harper, 2021).

² Michael Connelly, *The Darkest Hour* (New Your: Little Brown, 2021).

by his partisan colleagues, is telling. They must be okay with that perversion of democracy. Stomp out that dangerous torch of liberty – the “wrong” people are voting.

The Prince of Peace that we behold is the embodiment of God’s Generous Welcome. And no welcome could be more generous this time of year than Lawrence O’Donnell’s and MSNBC’s K.I.N.D fund project.

That is the spirit behind Lawrence O’Donnell’s efforts to promote education in Malawi through the K.I.N.D. project -- Kids in Need of Desks. Lawrence is imbued with Catholic social teaching. He and his partners have changed everything in those classrooms where previously children sat on the floor. Now, many, for the first time, have desks.

Lawrence and his partners on MSNBC and in UNICEF have gone beyond that simple need to also promote girl’s education by providing girls with high school scholarships.³ Education is in fact the Christ Light, opening full potential in these young women. Educate women and you build up a nation.

Each year Lawrence introduces one or two of the girls whose lives have been transformed by this gift of education. This year, featured has been Joyce Chisale, who is not only an aspiring poet, but is now a first-year student in a medical school. All because of the K.I.N.D Fund and the hundreds of thousands who have contributed – they are the living radiance of the Epiphany Star.

This year Joyce Chisale read a poem she had penned in 2017, “Little by Little.” Young as she is, here’s one woman the darkness has not overcome. In the years to come, we’re going to hear a lot more from her. Joyce Chisale gets the Last Word

Little by Little

Little by little we’ll go
no matter how far the distance is
we’re not shaken

Little by little we’ll go
and reach our destination

Little by little we’ll go
no matter how bumpy or rocky the road is
we’re not going to turn back

little by little we’ll go
and stay true to our dreams

³ Andrew Brown, “Little by Little a Malawian Girl Follows Her Dreams”, UNICEF Malawi, 2017

Little by little we'll go
no matter how narrow the path is
we are going to force ourselves to pass
and little by little we'll go
and reach the promised land
Don't be shaken
don't turn back
little by little we'll go
and reach our destination.

Little by little is how those three wise men happened upon Bethlehem. In this same manor Joyce Chisale arrived at a medical school in Malawi. Little by little, we'll preserve our democracy. Little by little, a light shows the path – and little by little is how we'll reach our “Star of Wonder, Beauty Bright.” Amen.