



Living in the Light

Text: Matthew 2: 1-12
Matthew 5: 9-16

January 8, 2012

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I want to show you an image that you will know the meaning of the moment you see it:



This little fellow, of course, has an idea – and we know it because he has a light bulb over his head. This image was invented in the 1920s for a *Felix the Cat* cartoon but since then it's become universally known, appearing not only in cartoons but in advertising, television and countless other media. When "the light goes on", it means, quite simply, that you've had a new idea, an idea you've never had before.

This morning we are marking Epiphany, and the theme of a "light going on" is central to the church's traditional understanding of this day. Just take a minute now to grab a hymnbook from under your seat, and turn to the Epiphany section. It starts at number 79. As you flip through the few pages that follow, look at some of the titles of the Epiphany hymns:

- Arise, Your Light has Come
- A Light is Gleaming
- Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light
- Midnight Stars Make Bright the Sky
- I am the Light of the World
- In the Darkness Shines the Splendour
- When Heaven's Bright with Mystery
- Will You Come and See the Light,
and so on . . .

It's almost as if there's a theme here, isn't it? For Christians, Epiphany is the day we celebrate the in-breaking of a new light into the world. The Epiphany story, of course, is the tale of the Wise Men, the Magi travelling to Bethlehem to see this new baby king. But the central figure in the story, if we trust our hymnody and tradition in the church is not, in fact, the Wise Men but the Star. It's the Star that breaks through the darkness, the Star that redirects the course of history; the Wise Men simply do what comes naturally when that celestial light bulb goes on above their heads. Epiphany is the day of Enlightenment.

The idea of Enlightenment is, of course, not uniquely or even primarily a Christian one. In fact, it's an idea towards which the church has often been quite hostile. In the late 17th and 18th Century, the Age of Enlightenment was a period in which intellectual thought was dominated by the passionate pursuit of reason. Often desiring to counter the superstitions and intolerance of religious thought, philosophers such as John Locke, mathematicians like Isaac Newton, and intellectuals such as Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau lined up to argue passionately for the supremacy of reason in

the course of human affairs. This was about the time of the invention of the printing press, so these radical new ideas about science, about the nature of the universe, about the source of truth and the grounds of ethics spread widely, despite the often-vigorous attempts of the church to rein them in. After all, if the world were governed by principles of rational thought, what would be the place of faith? And perhaps more to the point, if truth were to be found in rational exploration of the world around us, what would be the authority, the power, of the church? And so was engaged the battle – a battle that would ebb and flow throughout the intervening years between then and now, a battle between Enlightenment and Faith.

Very early in my career, when I was about 21 years old and knew everything, I preached a particularly atrocious sermon in Bell's Corner's United Church in Ottawa. It might even have been the very first sermon I preached there, and the wonder is that they ever let me preach again. In that early homiletical masterpiece, I decided that I should clarify for those poor, benighted souls the intricacies of the relationship between science and religion. That was back in the day when it was widely understood that science and religion were somehow at odds with each other, so much so that, in many instances, one had to choose between the *limited* wisdom of the scientific community, and the *unlimited* brilliance of religious faith. But, I explained in detail which is now painful to recall, there really didn't need to be a conflict between the two disciplines; science merely needed to understand its boundaries, and restrict itself to the small questions of how the world worked mechanically, while religion would take the *big* view, focusing not on mechanical trivia, but rather on the ultimate questions which really, after all, were the only ones that mattered. Science, I explained pathetically, could deal with *how* the world worked; religion didn't really care about such miniscule details; religion was about the big picture, and when science seemed to contradict religion, well, clearly science was wrong, and would smarten up if given enough time.

Sheesh.

While that sermon was particularly mine, and particularly awful, I should say, perhaps defensively, that it really wasn't very far from orthodoxy amongst Christians at the time on matters such as this. Science, knowledge, wisdom: these were considered important disciplines to be sure, but always secondary disciplines – secondary to the real stuff of life, stuff like faith, obedience and discipleship. It was fine to dabble in the study of evolution, or the nature of the universe, or the reproductive habits of the squirrel, as long as you understood that real truth lay in the Bible, and the things that ultimately mattered were beyond the mind, in the realm of the spirit. These were seen as competing values: mind and spirit, science and religion, knowledge and faith, earth and heaven, temporal and eternal. And always the former categories of mind, science, earth, knowledge, the temporal, were secondary and subordinate to the things that really mattered: religion, faith, the spirit, the eternal. The Star, on that first Epiphany, did move through the night sky, because the Bible said it did; it was fine for science to speculate about what exactly that event was – a comet, an asteroid, whatever – but nothing in those explorations would ever change the ultimate truth of a moving star followed by faithful, obedient men on camels.

I was a great fan of Charles M. Schultz, and a devoted reader and collector of his brilliant social commentary *Peanuts*, back before that series was taken captive by marketers and turned into a saccharine children's plaything. Charles Schultz explored, in many ways, this relationship between mindless faith and the real world in which it functioned, and one of the most brilliant of those explorations was in the fascination and fealty which Linus devoted to *The Great Pumpkin*. You'll

remember how, every Halloween, Linus would seek out the most faithful pumpkin patch in the neighbourhood and, having written his letter to the Great Pumpkin days before, would wait out in the cold and abuse of his friends for the Great Pumpkin to come and shower him with blessings. It never happened, of course, but Linus believed – oh my, he believed – and so every year there was both an explanation for that year’s failure, and the renewed hope of something better to come next year. It



was, I suppose, the cartoon version of the grim reality that is the Toronto Maple Leafs. Nothing could shake Linus’s faith, despite recurring and unwavering evidence that his faith was mis-invested. Charlie Brown did not believe in the Great Pumpkin, and tried everything to get Linus to examine the evidence; in one particularly caustic exchange, Charlie asks Linus when is he going to stop being “crazy” and believing in something that doesn’t exist, to which Linus responds, “When you stop believing in that fellow with a red suit and the white beard who goes, ‘Ho, ho, ho!’” But the really interesting character in these exchanges is neither Charlie Brown nor Linus – it’s Lucy. As so often happens in *Peanuts*, Lucy represents the “everyman”; she is you and me, often at our worst, occasionally at our best. Lucy doesn’t believe in the Great Pumpkin – she’s smart, she knows better, she’s seen the evidence, and waved it more times than enough in Linus’ face. But Lucy is also fundamentally selfish, and she doesn’t want to take any chances. What if Linus is right, after all? Lucy certainly doesn’t want to miss out on a blessing, a gift, a benevolence. What if there really is a guy-in-the-sky? One year, she builds her own pumpkin patch to lure the Great One away from Linus – a patch which Linus quickly dismisses as the most insincere ever. In the final frame, we see Lucy selling off her pumpkins for a nickel apiece. Another year, Lucy rants about how there is no great Pumpkin, but nonetheless helps Linus write his letter and mail it, on the condition that he makes sure to note in the letter how big a help she has been. Prayer never hurts. And in one of my favorite *Peanuts* moments, Lucy candidly, but loudly proclaims, “OK, OK, I believe in the Great Pumpkin. I know I’m stupid. But I believe.”

There have been times, many times, when I am reciting the Apostles Creed or some other similar piece of drab Christian orthodoxy, when I know precisely what Lucy means.

But this is the day of Epiphany, so let’s go back to the story for a moment. Remember, please, that this is a story Matthew makes up. He starts with a couple of tidbits that were widely accepted in the community by then, i.e. that Jesus was born in Bethlehem to a virgin mother named Mary and a reluctant father named Joseph. Unlike Luke, he doesn’t make Jesus out to be especially poor; he’s not born in a stable, there are no shepherds, no angels, and no friendly beasts. Instead, Matthew’s Jesus is born in a house, and the sky is lit by an especially bright star. Onto this stage, then, Matthew introduces these characters we know as the Wise Men, or Magi; he doesn’t tell us how many there were, we don’t know their names, and there are no camels – all of that is the stuff of the church or the greeting card industry. Nor does Matthew really tell us who these guys were supposed to represent; we don’t know if he thought of them as kings, scholars, magicians, or whatever. But he’s framing a story, or more precisely, setting up a little vignette here – and for the purposes of his drama, these fellows have three qualities at least: they are foreigners, not Jews; they are educated (because they have studied both the Hebrew scriptures and the night sky); and they are privileged (because they are granted an audience with King Herod, which, obviously, ordinary people didn’t get). So here are these three characters, powerful and educated, following a bright star and trying to figure out what it means. They liaise with Herod and his court officials, and Herod dispatches them to Bethlehem with

the specific instruction that they are to go to Bethlehem, check out the story of this new baby, and come back and report to him. Clearly, they agree to do so, because they are released by Herod and sent on their way. So they travel to Bethlehem and find the house where Jesus is living – remember, no stable, no shepherds, just an ordinary house in this story. They meet the baby and his parents, and that, we're told, is the moment when the light goes on. Matthew says, "The sight of the star filled them with delight." Above their head, that little light lit up. And they do two things. Firstly, they present to the child these three, very strange gifts: gold, a symbol of royalty; frankincense, a symbol of divinity; and myrrh, a symbol of suffering. These are not ordinary baby gifts; Matthew, the master story-teller, places them in the hands of his characters so that we will understand that, in that moment, even though they were outsiders to Judaism, they knew, they just *knew* that this child was something very, very special. Then, faced with that knowledge, they use their heads. "Why," they asked themselves, "does Herod want us to come back to him? What's going on?" The light, you see, had gone on. They saw through the world's deceptions. They saw through the lies, the dominance, the oppression for which Herod stood. And so they turned their back on Herod, and went home, we're told, "a different way".

It's always a remarkable time in our life's journey when the light goes on and we realize, with all the clarity of that shining star, that we have to go a different way.

Over the next four weeks here at LPCC, we'll be led by outstanding guest speakers during our series on *The Ethics of Energy*. You've all seen the brochures; there's that light bulb again on the front cover. I wish I could claim brilliance for that design but sadly it was our graphic designer, not me, who thought it up. It's certainly the right symbol, though, because what this series will ask you to do is consider whether, on the matter of energy, the time has come when we must quite simply go a different way. Two of our speakers, Moderator Mardi Tindal and journalist Alanna Mitchell, were in Durban, SA, for the recent climate change talks, talks during which it was a source of shame to be a Canadian. Even as the Magi listened to the deceit of Herod in Jerusalem, Canadians listened to the lies, the deceit and the deception of Peter Kent and other representatives of our country at those talks. I won't steal either Mardi or Alanna's thunder by going further down that road this morning. What I do want you to understand, however, on this Epiphany morning of Enlightenment, is that discussions such as this are not simply matters of science, not merely matters of economic or political policy – they are matters of faith. Matthew had no need to inject Herod into his nativity story, but he does so in order that we will understand the connection between meeting Christ, and living authentically in secular society. According to Matthew, when we meet the Christ, a light goes on, and we start to ask questions that might not have ever crossed our mind before – questions that the state would prefer us not to ask, and questions that, throughout most of history, the church would prefer us not to ask.

Epiphany, more than any other Sunday of the year, is the occasion on which we are reminded that anytime, anytime a religion asks us to sacrifice reason on the altar of faith, we should be suspicious. Very suspicious. And anytime the church asks us to check our brains at the door, we should be even more suspicious. Faith which is real revels in reason, and dances in the light. Faith that is true is not afraid of the truth. Faith which is strong looks for answers by asking questions.

Authentic faith is never afraid to go home a different way.

Amen.