

Epiphany of our Lord
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I pray that you all had a wonderful and blessed Christmas, and that the glory of God shone on all your family reunions, office parties, and festive gatherings. Christmas is a special time of year and it can be amazing how people are transformed into people of peace and good cheer this time of year. But then it's back to our normal routines, and for some the joy we experience can be all too fleeting.

In our Old Testament lesson for today the people of God had just been released from their prisoner of war camps, and they were surprised and excited. The Jews had just returned to the Promised Land, back to Jerusalem, back to their old farms and houses after many decades in exile. What were the people's feelings? Well, after the excitement of being released had passed, by the time they returned to their homeland, they were depressed, for things were not as they remembered. We would have been depressed too if we had seen their homes, farms, and country when they came back. Everything had been gutted by war. On the history channel the other day I saw a documentary on WWII, and I can hardly imagine how it must have felt for many of the Europeans after world War II, when all their cathedrals and homes and factories had been bombed out and all that could be seen was rubble. That's what it was like when the Jews came back to Israel after their exile. Everything they had dreamed of returning to was destroyed. Their farms were rubble, their cities were rubble, their businesses were rubble, their sons had been killed, their husbands eliminated. And everybody was depressed.

Into that situation of the aftermath of war, the prophet Isaiah wrote, "Those of you who walk in darkness, Rise, Shine, Get up, Get Going. Your light has already come. God's light is already shining upon you. He said, "Lift up your heads." Those of you who have your chins down, lift them up.

Those of you who have closed their eyes, open them up.

Those of you wallowing in depression, wake up and get up.

Your light has already come.

Everybody will at some time go through periods of depression. There are no exceptions. Even children will go through times of depression, because circumstances arise that will depress us. The loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of a home, the loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend, when a marriage fails, when we're suddenly faced with a serious illness, when something happens to us that causes us to lose our sense of self-esteem, there are so many different experiences like this we will face in our lives. And it is in those times when we need to hear the words of Isaiah:

"Those of you who walk in darkness, Rise, shine; for your light has come."

When people seek counseling, it is always comforting to hear such words of hope and encouragement. And there probably isn't anything better than to have a support

network available to us that can provide us with those type of encouraging words, to redirect us, and help us get back on track when we're going through the tough times.

But sometimes, words are not enough. Sometimes, we can be so distraught, we'll dismiss those words of hope. We'll say, "it's easy for you to say that, you're not going through what I'm going through. All those rosy, positive, sunshiny words, they aren't going to change anything."

And I'm afraid it's true, just reciting a bunch of positive affirmations isn't going to change anything.....unless they point to something greater than ourselves. Those words won't change anything unless they are linked to hope and faith. You see when someone not only hears, but also believes that what the counselor is saying might be true for them, it is only then, that they can begin to make the necessary changes.

When the people of Israel came back to their ravaged city, it was only when they believed Isaiah's prophecy, that God was with them, and that God still had a plan for them, only then, could they take their land and their lives back and restore their nation. Only then could they receive the benefits that Isaiah foretold, that "the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you...they shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim praise of the Lord."

Incredible things happen in OUR lives as well, when we embrace Isaiah's words of hope, and truly believe, that "The light of God is already shining upon you."

In our gospel lesson we find another gathering of people, and although their lives were not so desperate, they too were searching for answers, they too were searching for meaning, for God's plan in their life.

The story of the Maji is an intriguing account, for these travelers came to, of all places, backwater Bethlehem, in search of a king. They came in search of answers. They came to learn about God and about an amazing thing that God may be doing. Can you imagine being so curious about God that you'd be willing to take a trip to an unknown destination, that may take months, or even years, that may cost you a small fortune, and that you'd be traveling through an unforgiving desert to get there. Can you imagine?

I think we tend to be impressed with what Jesus' disciples did, when they left everything to follow Jesus. But Jesus was right there in front of them. All the Magi had to follow, was a star.

It was commonly believed at that time, that at the birth and deaths of great men that some heavenly sign would be given. Some even believed that each of us has a star that starts shining from the time we're born until the time of our death. So a new star in the sky would signify the coming of a king. And when they saw the wonderful star that began to do funny, miraculous things in the heavens, they were filled with joy, in fact, they were jumping for joy. It was as if they heard the words of Isaiah, "Rise, shine, for

your light has already come.” These men had hungered for the truth, hungered for answers to the mysteries of life, they hungered for God. And so they began a spiritual journey in a quest of their king.

We’re not sure how long they traveled, perhaps months, maybe even years, crossing mountains and deserts and who knows how many obstacles they encountered. But to find the chosen one, the Son of God, they would have done anything, no matter the cost, and perhaps that is why we call them wise men today.

And when they arrived at the scene with Mary and Joseph, they worshipped him. They bowed down on their knees and worshipped him, for they knew that Jesus was the answer, the answer to all their life’s questions.

And they brought gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gifts foretold by Isaiah to proclaim their praise to the Lord. But their wisdom wasn’t in giving their material gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, their wisdom was in the gift of their total selves in their journey to find Christ. Their trip took years to find Christ, it took time, it took energy, it required faith and trust. They were totally devoted to the mission of finding Christ, and to that end they were willing to use all their resources, no matter the cost.

As we enter this new year, this new decade, we also embark on a journey, and even though we each have our own roads to travel down, we journey together in our spiritual quest to know the Lord. Let us be inspired by the example of the Magi, who found the One they were looking for, the One who brings instills grace and peace. The One who calls us to believe.

And let us live with Isaiah’s proclamation that the light has come, the true light that brings light to the world. So with confidence know that you can overcome anything. It is a joy to be on this journey with you, for the light of God is shining on you. Amen