

Sermons at Christ Church

Building Relationships Through Love.

Epiphany IV

Rev. Emmanuel Mercer

Epiphany is about revelatory light. Light that makes you see clearly. Light that reveals God to us. Light that reveals God's intentions for us and the world. Light that reveals God's Word which has been made manifest in Christ Jesus. Epiphany's light is embodied in the words of the promises we read in the sermon on the mount. Epiphany's light is the light that makes visible the good news of God in Christ. The good news that sets us free.

The freedom that the good news bestows upon us isn't about doing whatever we want. To use that freedom in doing whatever we want is to continue to be slaves to human desires. The true freedom which the good news of Jesus Christ offers to us is one where we build the capacity to be able to say no to our desires. If we cannot say no to ourselves, then we are most certainly not free-we are still bound by the chains of darkness.

I remember as a kid, electricity was in short supply in my native Ghana, and indeed, in most third world countries. Although there has been some improvement, not much has changed. The lights go off at any time of the day with no prior notice. And whenever the lights are turned on, you will hear screams of joy by both children and adults. Light always brings excitement because we want to see what's going on around us.

You and I rejoice in the light because nothing is hidden. And so long as we can see, we don't fall, and we make sound decisions that reflect the light into which God has called each of us. Epiphany's light is such that it brings to the fore, hidden truths about ourselves and our world. And then invites us to ask ourselves some deep, deep questions. Do you still want to live in darkness or the light?

Someone asked me this question, if Alex Patti, the gentleman who was fatally shot in Minneapolis had been a Blackman, would we have seen the same pushback from citizens across the country? And would the political class have reacted in the same way that they did.

My response was, I don't know. But my sense is that we live in a system where we are told was built on Judea-Christian values-those values are not any different from what we read in the sermon on the mount.

But sometimes, sometimes we struggle to find those values at work in our lives and in our society. Sometimes, we painfully come to the realization that those values apply to some of us and not all of us. Sometimes, there is this rude awakening-do these values matter. And if they do matter, how do we create a society where its relevance isn't a question of debate?

In 1781, the British Slave Ship Zong was crossing the Atlantic, packed with Slaves from West Africa. There were over 400 enslaved Africans on board that ship. The enslaved were so tightly packed like sardines that they could barely breathe. The captain, Luke Collingwood made a terrible navigational error. As a result, their supplies of food and water run low. But under British maritime law, there was a rule, lost cargo can be insured but dead slaves cannot.

The crew then made this calculation, if the enslaved Africans die from illness, there was no money to be paid for the lost cargo. But if they are thrown overboard, insurance will pay them for their lost cargo. And so, over several days, they threw women and children, and then men.

They were all pushed through cabin windows into the open ocean. When all was said and done, one hundred thirty-two human beings had been deliberately thrown into the ocean. Their memories went into the ocean with them. Their lives were erased. No trace, no legacy, nothing.

When the ship finally made it to Jamaica, the owners sued the insurance company, and their argument was that the cargo was lost at sea. The court agreed because as the solicitor general declared, Blacks are goods and property.

It was Olaudah Equiano, a freed man who brought this horrific atrocity to light. Imagine if he hadn't shed light on this atrocity? Olaudah convinces me that these values matter. His revelation was Epiphany's light because it not only revealed the depth of human depravity, but the morass of a system that puts profit above human beings. It revealed a canker that made others believe that their lives did not matter-and it mattered only when those lives enriched the pockets of their owners.

Our painful reality is that this canker still persists within our society. And it seems to me, rather sadly, that no amount of human development is enough to help others believe that each human life is worth every ounce of dignity.

As many of you know, we have millions of citizens on the streets, protesting the actions of their own government. It isn't the case that the protesters don't believe in the rule of law, they do. But they reject the darkness that is creeping up on all of us. That darkness doesn't value all human life. That darkness desires to instill fear in citizens through violence. That darkness would put profit above human life. That darkness would throw people in the ocean just so they can file a claim for lost cargo.

We reject all this darkness not because we are perfect people but because of what Epiphany's light has revealed to us.

What is the point of the light if it cannot help us to see that we have been living in darkness, and rejoice because like an African kid because the lights have been turned on?

One of the life transforming promises of the sermon on the mount is the embrace of suffering because of the good news. *Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you on account of the gospel, rejoice and be glad.* Jesus says. That thought alone takes me back to the creation story in Genesis 1, when God through creation brought order to a formless void. God called creation good. God didn't say creation was perfect but good.

But creation being good doesn't mean there is no longer chaos nor beasts nor monsters. There are still monsters within creation, and you and I would have to contend with these monsters. These monsters would always be against the life transforming nature of the good news because they profit from it.

Creation being good means there is work-and our work is not to partner with the serpent like Adam and Eve to bring more chaos to the world. Our work is to bring Epiphany's light to the dark places of our world. And this work will bring a lot of suffering, but we are a people who do not grieve without hope. We grieve because there is hope, and because there is hope, we embrace our suffering because it will last but for a while.

The promises of the sermon reveal to us that the more we focus on pursuing extrinsic values, the less time we have to pursue intrinsic values. Extrinsic values make us feel that we need something outside of ourselves, in order to have value. That we need material stuff and the world's glory to be relevant.

The sad reality is that we have to depend on what is outside of us for affirmation and value. And this pursuit not only creates unhealthy competition and a society where the end justifies the means, but it also creates mental health problems because we are always anxious about what others might think of us and what we have to do to remain relevant.

Intrinsic values on the other hand, are linked towards the wellbeing we want, not only for ourselves but for all people. “Blessed are the meek, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, “Blessed are the merciful, “Blessed are the pure in heart, Blessed are the peacemakers.” Intrinsic values.

Intrinsic values are the values that assure us that we matter, and that no matter how we are being treated, our task is to use the gospel to bring order to a chaotic world. We don’t compete with what is going on outside of us, we counter what is going on with the calm assurance of the promises of Jesus Christ which frees us from darkness.

I heard about this teenager who’s just gotten his driver’s license. He asked his father about borrowing the car. The father said to him, son I’d like to make a deal with you, if you bring your grades up, read your bible every day and cut your hair, I’ll let you borrow it.

The son came back a few weeks later and asked if he could borrow the car. The father said, son, you’ve brought your grades up, you’ve been reading your bible but you still haven’t cut your hair.

The son said ‘dad, I’ve been thinking. Moses had long hair, Samson had long hair, even Jesus had long hair. The father said ‘Yes, son and they walked everywhere they went.’

In my weekly blog this past Thursday, I wrote about the posture of the heart and I reflected on Micah’s question “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” This is the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this is Epiphany’s light. It is this revelatory light that helps us to see the chaos in the world.

Our task isn’t to add to the chaos. But where there’s darkness, we may shed Epiphany’s light like Olaudah Equiano and the millions of citizens who are peacefully marching on our streets. Where there is hatred, we may bring the love of Christ that churns human heart towards meaning and purpose. Where there’s bondage, we may bring the gospel of Jesus Christ that frees us from the

darkness. And where pride leads the way, we may remind ourselves of the richness of a humble walk with God.

Epiphany's light invites us to reject the chaos of darkness for the sake of order. Today, if you hear God's voice, harden not your heart. **Amen.**