

January 5, 2020  
Rev. Jane Florence  
Title: "The Light of the World"  
Text: Matthew 2: 1-12



We have lost our awe of light. I think we lost our awe of it when we mastered it. We condensed the ancient awe and wonder of light into a simple switch. We can flip it on just about where ever and whenever we want. We do not sit in darkness (literally speaking) unless we choose to or fail to pay our utility bill. Can you imagine a time when that was not the case? Imagine when the starry night sky could not be overpowered by human engineered wattage? when our light pollution did not dim the brilliance of the universe? when a simple fire, a single candle, an oil lamp- were the only source of light on these dark, dark winter nights that seem to go on forever? When we hear that, we think- so start the fire, light the lamp- but again that's our perspective of abundance. We don't live in a time/place mind of limited fuel... not really. We know our fossil fuels are limited and supply and demand forces prices higher, but most just agree to pay more. It's not as if a quarter cup of oil in our lamp is ALL the fuel we have – or all we may have.

When the king of Magadha heard that Buddha was approaching his capital, he hung the city with festive decorations. He lined the main street with thousands of lamps in ornate holders. The lamps were all lit to honor the Buddha when he passed by.

In the same city lived an old woman who greatly admired the Buddha as well. She longed to take her own clay lamp and join the crowds that would line the roads. Her lamp was broken. She had no money for a new one. She carefully removed threads from the edge of her garment and made a crude wick. The shopkeeper, who knew she had no money, poured a tiny bit of oil into her lamp.

A stiff breeze had come up by the time she reached the main street. She knew she did not have enough oil to last long. She waited and waited. She did not dare light her lamp until the moment she saw the figure of Buddha come into view.

Just as Buddha reached the city gates, the great gust of wind extinguished all the festive lamps lit by the king. He entered the darkened city. When Buddha passed, only one light remained burning: a broken clay lamp that an old woman guarded with both hands.

The Buddha stopped in front of her. He turned to the other disciples and said, "Take note of this woman! As long as spiritual disciplines are practiced with this kind of love and dedication, the light of the world will never go out."<sup>1</sup>

In Matthew, Jesus tells a story about ten young girls waiting for the arrival of a bridegroom. He was a long time in arriving. So long that five of the young girls had used up all the oil in their lamps before he arrived. The five foolish ones dashed off to refill their oil. The groom arrived while they were gone; they missed his arrival. The five others were wise; they had planned carefully with their oil. They welcomed the groom with their oil lamps lit, and they feasted at the wedding banquet. (Matthew 25: 1-13)

Like the Buddha tradition, the Jesus tradition tells a parable about the wise tending carefully to their source of light in eagerness and anticipation. Light is a universal symbol of

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<sup>1</sup> Sir John Templeton, *Wisdom from World Religions*. Templeton Press, 2002, 151.

wisdom. Even in cartoon language, the symbol for a bright idea is a light bulb overhead. Those who are wise and devoted and careful hold light. Those who are wise and devoted and careful seek light, for light is life.

Throughout Matthew's gospel, the message prevails that Jesus fulfills Jewish prophesy. Over and over, Matthew reads that Jesus acts "in order to fulfill the scriptures." Matthew proclaims that Jesus is the king of the Jews. Here he expands the ancient expectation of scripture. Jesus is king of the Jews, but even bigger than that. Wise seekers from beyond Jewish tradition came to honor him too. The magi were not Jewish. Matthew's story shows that Illumination is not just for some. The light of truth which Jesus proclaimed stretches far beyond just one peoples. It reaches out beyond borders, nationality, and culture. These magi were wise men who studied the stars. The stars which hung in the sky did not shine on one nation or one ethnic group or one religion. The same starry sky was above all. The magi were not opposed to going outside their own lands to discover what wisdom lie beyond.

Matthew's birth story line comes out of the ancient Hebrew scriptures. Isaiah 60 was a poem recited to Jews in Jerusalem about 580 BC. Jews had been in exile in Iraq; a remnant returned to their bombed-out city of Jerusalem in despair. Isaiah 60 sings out "rise shine, your light has come" ... "nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn..." Isaiah sings of the restoration of the Hebrew nation and their capital city to its former power – the way things used to be... rich, prosperous, powerful over other nations. That's Jerusalem. That's where these magi went expecting to find the new king... in the capital city, of course. They would expect the new king to be in the palace of the monarchy..... SURPRISE....

King Herod asks the Jewish priests about their old prophesies. He asks where was the Messiah to be born? The answer he is given not Isaiah 60. Instead, he is told the answer he seeks is in Micah 5; the child will come in Bethlehem.

Matthew hints the future king will be the voice *of* a peasant- the voice *for* the peasants. His story isn't going to be about rebuilding the way things used to be; it will be something all together different. The Messiah is not going to be about rich, prosperous, power OVER others. Matthew will tell us a story about mercy and justice, peace, goodness.

All religions are not the same. The differences are important to their followers. I say 'to their followers' because I don't believe the differences of true religions matter at all to the Divine Creator of the Universe. What do I mean by 'true religions'? I would submit that all our human constructs of faith which point to the same Divine Goodness of the Cosmos share some basic core morals and values. In these common teachings, we share in Truth. When we look beyond our semantics, we will find at the heart a transcendent unity of humanity and a way to unity with the Divine. The Hearts of Wisdom Seekers around the world, from differing cultures and times and places, embark on a journey to discover the Light of the World.

Our tradition teaches of Jesus: who as a child grew and became strong, and was filled with wisdom. We learn of boy Jesus in the temple searching for wisdom. We read of adult Jesus going out to wilderness seeking baptism and hearing God's voice of affirmation. We learn of Jesus spending time in the wilderness, where food and drink are used to taunt him and ultimately where angels care for him. At some 30 years or so, he leaves his wilderness awakening and begins to share his enlightenment of purpose to bring release to those held in

bondage, and wisdom to those sitting in darkness. He speaks of truth and light guiding people into ways of justice and mercy.

Other faith traditions tell stories of enlightened ones in their culture. Gautama was around 35 years of age when he experienced his “Awakening” or “Enlightenment.” He left home; left behind the grandeur of princely life; he left elegant cloths for a simple robe in search for wisdom. He too was deprived of food and rest, and he too was cared for following his wilderness experience. He awoke to a new vision of life and a new way of living in the world. He taught others to respect the sacred in one another, to live in compassion for others.

Muhammad retreated to a cave for meditation, around age 40. He left his wilderness and began sharing his understanding of respect for others and care through Islam.

The Apostle Paul of our tradition started out killing Christians, until a bright light on the road one day blinded him and gave him new sight, and he became a Jesus follower.

Martin Luther in 1517 was a Roman Catholic priest. He became a monk with long hours devoted to fasting, prayers. Through his disciplines, he awakened to new understandings which led him to challenge the hierarchy of corruption in the church he once loved.

John Wesley an ordained clergy sitting in a church one night felt his heart strangely warmed in new assurance.

Some have their awakenings in the flash of light...some in a wilderness wandering, others in the gentle, growing dawn of sunrise. Stories of those who have sought wisdom tell us - when we seek enlightenment, we will find; when we knock, the doors will open.

The cultures vary; the language is different, but stories are woven together with threads of love and goodness and light shining into darkness. Their stories tell of seekers who do not search in vain. Their stories weave justice and truth and compassion into the fabric of life. Spirituality means waking up. Growing in our spirit means we wake up from the sleep that has numbed us into believing that what we see is all there is; and how it is -is how it must be.

From those who have dared to follow the beckoning light..  
from those who struggled to awaken... we learn that there is a different way other than our sleeping existence.

From those who were not content to sit in darkness and who were not afraid to journey forth, we can learn the way to unity with one another.... the way to peace within... the way to awaken to the Divine presence as the ground of all being.

Follow the light and that's what you'll find. The light hanging over the new bright idea - a king of humility in a manger of straw, the light shining in the darkness... that's the epiphany! the eureka! the ah-ha!

Dare to go on a journey this year. Dare to quest after true wisdom, and you will find what will light up the world: mercy, and justice and peace, and goodness, compassion shared by wisdom seekers in all faiths. May our journey in 2020 lead us forward in God's goodness. May your journey in 2020 lead you deeper in God's love.