

January 26, 2025,  
The third Sunday after Epiphany, at St. Michael's Church  
The Reverend Joshua Wong

Focus: We are the light of the world

Function: Jesus asks us to live in the light, to care for the downtrodden, disadvantaged and the vulnerable.

Let us pray:

I want to walk as a child of the light.

I want to follow Jesus.

God set the stars to give light to the world.

The star of my life is Jesus.

Refrain:

In him there is no darkness at all.

The night and the day are both alike.

The Lamb is the light of the city of God.

Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

Amen.

*Please be seated.*

Today is the third Sunday after the Epiphany. A lot has happened so far during this beginning period of Jesus' ministry. I need to do one of those TV show Batman catchup scenes to bring us up to date. Jesus is newly baptized and the Holy Spirit appears to him in the form of a dove. The Holy Spirit then promptly leads Jesus into the desert for 40 days of fasting and temptation by the devil. Jesus successfully wards off the devil's ploys, and then begins a teaching tour in synagogues. Which brings us to today: Jesus

returns to his hometown of Nazareth where he will appear in the synagogue and give his first sermon, he's about to be warmly received — and then violently rejected (tune in next week!).

This leads us to today's Gospel. The Gospel text is one I can relate to easily, it's the story of Jesus' first sermon. Although my sermon did not create quite a stir, nevertheless, God's word is not simply food for thought, something to think about, mull over, consider for what it's worth. God's Word is confrontational. It calls us to account for the way we live out our faith. Jesus proclaimed the Word of the Lord to the people of God; in so doing, he upset the elders to such an extent that they drove him out of the synagogue.

As we mentioned last week, the word Epiphany comes from the Greek meaning, “manifestation. **We're in Epiphany, the season in the Christian year of widening light, expanding light.** The light rises and spreads; the light reveals and surprises; the light beckons and guides. God-with-Us was born and escaped Herod's wrath. The Child of Light has come into the world. The Magi are heading home by another road. The route is unfamiliar, and yet, the Light grows as they journey. This is the time of stars, millions of stars that dot the skies to lead our path. Hence, we began today's homily

with the lyrics to the hymn “*I want to walk as the child of the Light,*” by Kathleen Tomerson.

During Epiphany, as we look closely at the miracles Jesus performs in his ministry, I encourage you to understand these Jesus events as our current events. We are living in a time of surprises, a time of a new hope, and a time to accept new challenges.

If we see Epiphany as our current time, we then need to ask the question, “What is Jesus’ mission all about?” “What purpose does Jesus serve to be among us?”

In short, for Luke, Jesus’ mission is about proclaiming the dawn of the Great Jubilee, a new era of liberation, restoration, and return. In the Jewish tradition, the jubilee year was called every fifty years and was a time for forgiveness. It stood as a reminder of God's providence and mercy. The dedication of a year for this emphasis provided the community with a time to come back into right relationship with one another and with God.

Accordingly, this good news comes first of all not to the free but to captives, not to the comfortable but to the disadvantaged and downtrodden, not to the strong but to the vulnerable. In this “inaugural sermon,” Jesus is crystal clear

that the Gospel is above all about God “lifting up the lowly” — words we’ve heard ring out in song in Mary’s “Magnificat.”

But the Jubilee ideal, isn’t only for the benefit of the lowly — it’s also for the health of creation as a whole. Everyone benefits when liberty and wellbeing extend across the entire neighborhood. For Luke, following Jesus isn’t primarily about chasing down our own personal salvation for our own benefit, but rather about serving others, the willingness to share with those who need it most. Indeed, this is how Jesus begins his public teaching: with a call to serve, starting with the most vulnerable, and ultimately for the love of the whole world. And how does he end his public teaching eighteen chapters later? “The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves”

Jesus’ miracle events are our current events. We see the timeliness of the message of light right now, as our country transitions from one leader to another and all this month, commemorate the life of Jimmy Carter who was an example of being guided by self-less service through the work of Habitat For Humanity while serving in his church as a Sunday school teacher until

the end of his life. Last week we celebrated the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., who selflessly lived the Jubilee ideal by shining a light on the inequality and indecency in America towards our African American siblings.

Our nation and our church needs to continue expanding and widening the light of truth. Washington Bishop Mariann Budde courageously spoke at the Washington National Cathedral's Service of Prayer for the Nation asking the future president. "Millions have put their trust in you," "In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now." She lends the prophetic and brave voice that was and still is the mission of Jesus. She is courageously proclaiming the dawn of the Great Jubilee, a new era of liberation, restoration, and return.

Epiphany reminds us that our work is to serve all those whom Jesus cared for—the downtrodden, the disadvantaged and anyone that is a captive in their own minds and in the eyes of society.

The mission of Jesus requires us to be prepared for decisive moments, when we need to defend the Gospel, and speak the truth. This is the mission of Jesus and it is ours as well—to care and defend all people so that all captives can be set free. We are called to do our part, no matter how big or how small

we feel we can do to help the most vulnerable with the message of Christ's light. And remember, the captives are not "the other," that needs help, it includes us, we are all captives in different ways.

Decisive moments are those times in our lives when we actively choose a particular path or way of being in the world, one that requires us to be brave. We all want to be brave when it counts, to be one who steps up, leans in, does the right thing when it matters most. Being a follower of Jesus, following the life of Jesus, we see that Jesus had many decisive moments. He chose to heal people along the road that others thought were unimportant. He spoke to a Samaritan woman when it was culturally the wrong thing to do, and offered her living water. And we too are asked to defend the poor, the homeless against societal hardness. We are called to defend the truth when lies are being spread. We are called to defend people of color or people with disabilities who are often misunderstood.

Scripture teaches us to be people of compassion, mercy and justice and there is a big difference with each one. Compassion means to suffer with others, Mercy is something we show when we have some sort of power, influence or control that someone else doesn't have, and Justice is taking it one step

further, Justice is to help stop or prevent the suffering from happening in the first place.

Today, there are countless people surrounding us, and in history, that made decisive moments to live in the light.

Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara served as vice-consul for the Japanese Empire in Kaunas, Lithuania. During WW2, Sugihara helped save thousands of Jews by issuing transit visas to them so that they could travel through Japanese territory into safety, risking his career and the lives of his family. When the war broke out, he saw thousands of Jews begging for his help to receive visas. When he asked his superiors in Japan for approval, over and over again, they said absolutely not. But he still did it anyway, because he said, “he could not live with a clear conscience if he didn’t do it.”

When the Soviet troops entered Romania, they imprisoned Sugihara and his family in a POW camp for eighteen months. They were released in 1946 and returned to Japan through the Soviet Union via the Trans-Siberian Railway and was fired for helping the Jews.

In 1985, the State of Israel honored Sugihara as one of the Righteous Among Nations for his actions. He is the only Japanese national to have been so honored. Lithuania declared the year 2020 as “The Year of Chiune Sugihara” in his honor. Today, the estimated number of descendants of those who received “Sugihara visa” ranges between 40,000 and 100,000 people.

Sugihara’s story is not that remote from our present day life. We are called everyday to make decisions about choosing love over hate, and about choosing God over human-made systems. The conjunction of Epiphany with its awe-inspiring and yet sometimes awful moments is a profound, disorienting spiritual tension we are called to live in everyday.

Epiphany is living a Jubilee ideal, it is about forgiveness and remembering the lowly. A Jubilee ideal, benefits everyone when liberty and wellbeing extends across the entire neighborhoods. Changes begin when we make a decision to follow Jesus. Bishop Budde says, “ For when that decisive moment comes in the midst of a whirlwind and we feel called to act—to be truly brave—we do so trusting less in ourselves than in the power, the energy, the spirit that is compelling us forward.”



Jesus' mission is our mission—to bring good news to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. Whatever lies ahead in the new year, we like the Magi are heading home by another road. The route is unfamiliar, and yet, the Light grows as they journey. This is the time of stars, millions of stars that dot the skies to lead our path. We can do what God asks of us which is our part—faithfully, imperfectly, in an ever-changing world in which we, too, are being changed. This is the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.