

## Light for a New Year

Sarah Johnson

Ottawa Mennonite Church

Epiphany – January 2, 2011

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

### Who is Jesus?

Who is Jesus? A teacher? A human sacrifice? A miracle worker? A God? A prophet? A ruler or a trouble maker or a peace maker? All of this? None of this? Some of this? Who is Jesus? This is the question of Epiphany. Epiphany it is a time to focus on the identity of Jesus. It is a time to look beyond the cute baby and consider the man the baby becomes and the deity we claim the baby already is.

Three stories, each revealing something about the identity of Jesus, have historically been associated with Epiphany. The wedding at Cana<sup>1</sup>—when Jesus performs the first miracle, turning water into wine—reveals Jesus’ ministry will be characterised by wonders. The baptism of Jesus by John<sup>2</sup>—when the voice of God names Jesus “son” and the Holy Spirit descends—reveals a unique relationship between Jesus and God. The visitation of Jesus by the magi from the East<sup>3</sup>—who offer gifts fit for a king, a priest, and a dead man—reveals Jesus as ruler of the universe, a messiah for all people, and one who will suffer.<sup>4</sup> So....who is Jesus?

### How do we know who Jesus is?

Before we answer or even ask this question, there is another question we have to address: How do we *know* who Jesus is? Imagine one person you know: a friend, a teacher, a parent, a partner, a child. What do you know about this person? How do you know it? Experience? Observation? Intuition? Comparison to others? Trust in what the person told you? Trust is what someone else told you? *How* we know about someone is closely connect to *what* we know about someone. It is the *how we know question* I hope to concentrate on today.

### Light and knowledge

Light is an image associated with Epiphany which is so appropriate because light is both a metaphor we frequently use for God and a metaphor we often use for *knowledge or wisdom*. A new piece of evidence may “shed light on a situation.” A truth may be “brought to light.” The motto of one of my alma maters is “light and truth.”<sup>5</sup> A wise person is “enlightened.” We even imagine an epiphany as a light bulb popping up over someone’s head.

### Three lights

The “three wise men” is the popular description of the astrologers of unknown number we meet in Matthew. I believe this story can be a valuable *metaphor* for three types of wisdom, three types of light, three ways of knowing who Jesus is.<sup>6</sup> I’m not saying the magi were actually thinking in any of these ways. I am using their story as an image for exploring our story, our search for Jesus as a community.

<sup>1</sup> John 2:1-11

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22, John 1:29-34

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 2:1-12

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Hull Stookey. *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church*. Abingdon, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.yale.edu/timeline/1701/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> I borrow the image of the three lights from a course entitled *The Church and Ministry* taught by Gary Harder and Lydia Harder at Conrad Grebel University College in 2007. In this context the lights are associated with premodernism, modernism and postmodernism.

### **Candlelight**

[A single white pillar candle is lit.] A candle. A steady glow. A small fire. The fire our ancestors have gathered for millennia. The fire around which we gather at Camp Iawah. The fire we lit every Sunday of Advent. The candle represents *knowledge grounded in traditional authorities*. It values stability and clarity. It hopes for universality and singularity. This is an image we heard about in Isaiah: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”<sup>7</sup>

We see the magi seeking Jesus in this way. The turn to a trusted tradition: the Hebrew Scriptures. The turn to a supposedly trusted individual, the king, Herod, who was perhaps not trustworthy after all.

Some of us here at Ottawa Mennonite Church, like the magi, see the world and search for Jesus by candle light. We submit ourselves to trusted traditions of worship, a confession of faith, and the wisdom of mentors. We acknowledge the Bible as the Word of God, utterly reliable, and revere it with profound faith. But, not all of us know Jesus by candlelight.

### **Flashlight**

[A flashlight is switched on.] A flashlight. A puddle of light bouncing along in front of my feet at a campsite. A spot light focusing our attention on the star of the show. A narrow beam used to find that bolt dropped behind the water heater or to illumine the words on the page under the covers. Directed. Precise. The flashlight represents *knowledge based on reason and evidence*, making and testing hypotheses, querying the tradition, eliminating possibilities, charting one clear direction. We encounter this image in Psalm 119: “Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light for my path.”<sup>8</sup>

We can imagine the magi searching for Jesus in this way. They analyze the astronomical data and conclude that a particular star is the appropriate guide. They begin to follow it, however, this star is not quite as precise as a GPS. They postulate that the new king is in the old king’s palace. When they discover this is incorrect, they try again, this time tracking Jesus down to Bethlehem.

Some of us in this church, like the magi, see the world and search for Jesus by flashlight. We carefully critique existing practices, and test new possibilities, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. We listen to the wisdom of science and social science and incorporate these ideas into how we know Jesus. We analyze scripture attending historical context and critical scholarship, asking hard questions about how these ancient words can direct our way today. But not all of us know Jesus by flashlight or candlelight.

### **Christmas lights**

[A string of white Christmas lights is turned on.] Christmas lights. We see many of these at this time of year. I thought there were a lot in my Vanier neighbourhood....and then I went to Kanata. We see lights sparkling through tree branches reminiscent of stars scattered across the sky, of fireflies swooping near the grass, of thousands of cell phones gentle swaying to the music, of Christmas Eve candles cradled in our hands. Christmas lights, many distinct lights on one string, represent *knowledge based on particular experience*, our own and that of others, shared in community. This form of knowledge attends to diversity, and is aware of the distinctive gifts of each individual and tradition. Paul writes about “the wisdom of God, in its rich variety.”<sup>9</sup> He describes how gentiles have become part of the body of Christ, how wisdom from outside the Jewish community must now be attended to as part of knowing about God.

---

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 60:3

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 119:105

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 3:10

The magi are similar. They are outsiders joining the otherwise Jewish cast of the nativity. They are people of high social status in contrast to the other characters of low social rank. The unique experience of the magi: their feeling of overwhelming joy, the gifts they choose to bring to the newborn king, the dream they trust to lead them home by another road, provide a different perspective on the infant Jesus.

Some of us at Ottawa Mennonite may see the world and search for Jesus by Christmas light. We acknowledge the distinct light in each one of us and share our experiences of faith in Jesus with one another around a quilting table or over bowls of chilli: "This little light of mine....I'm going to let it shine."<sup>10</sup> We also listen to the experiences of those different from ourselves by inviting people into this community from across the city and around the world and by reaching out to learn and serve in Ottawa and beyond. We read scripture through the lens of our experience and listen for how God is speaking to us through these words today.

### **Three ways of knowing**

Three ways of knowing. A candle: knowledge centered in traditional authorities. A flashlight: knowledge based on reason and proof. Christmas lights: knowledge grounded on particular experience shared in community. None of these ways of knowing is better or worse than any other. None of these ways of knowing are mutually exclusive. Some of us may find ourselves resonating with one more than the others. Some of us may find ourselves resisting one more than the others. We each bring different types of wisdom, different ways of knowing, to this community. I hope and trust that different approaches, although they can be the root of conflict, can also be complementary as we ask together: Who is Jesus?

### **Light for a new year**

New Years is a time when we look back. The news is full of "year in review" stories. The radio is constantly counting down the top songs of 2010. We consider where we were a year ago today and marvel at how little and how much has changed.

New Years is also a time to look ahead, to wonder and hope and plan where we will be a year from today. Often our goals for the coming year involve being healthier, more financially stable, or working on relationships. These are all good and important things. They are all part of a life of faith. However, I wonder what it would look like if we, as individuals and a community, committed to asking a question together: "Who is Jesus?"

*And how would we know?* Those of us who know by candlelight could share our wisdom. Those of us who know by flashlight could share our wisdom. Those of us who know by Christmas lights could share our wisdom. We could attend to the light that others bring even when it seems glaring or weak. We could borrow one another's lights to read scripture with a different attitude or see a situation in a new way. *Who is Jesus?* If we ask this question together this year, what infant, what human, what God, would we meet? Who would Jesus be for us in 2011?

### **Darkness**

Epiphany is a celebration of the identity of God in Jesus being revealed, of mystery demystified. However, I often find the more I know about something or someone the more aware I am of how little I know. Light eventually serves to reveal the darkness of the unknown. We must humbly face the limits of human knowledge. *[The candle is extinguished. The flashlight is switched off. The Christmas lights are turned off.]* Yet we can hope that when the light of our wisdom reaches its limit, we will meet the gentle embrace of the good and sacred darkness of the mystery of God.

---

<sup>10</sup> "This little light of mine." *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. 401.