***“Following the Light”***

**Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23**

**3rd Sunday after Epiphany/January 22, 2023**

**Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake**

A few months ago, I discovered—much to my surprise—that some of my first ancestors to come to America [on my mother’s side] were *Quakers* who settled on Long Island. Although we mostly think of that tradition through old-fashioned stereotypes, *Quakers,* of course, is the nickname for the *Society of Friends,* and that group, founded in the mid-1600’s, has never been *quaint.*

You see, Quakers believed that *every human being* was filled with the *“inner light,”* or the presence of God. Because of this, there was no need for clergy or even a church. The *Friends* met to encourage one another *to listen to* and *experience* the *light*.

As a result, they formed distinctly *egalitarian* communities, with *shared responsibilities* between men and women, and rejected class divisions. They called themselves *“Friends of the Truth”* or *“Friends of the Light.”* They were friends of God to one another.

According to Church Historian, *Diana Butler Bass*, the idea that Quakers were quaint came from their practice of addressing people as *“thou”* or *“thee,”* words we consider old-fashioned today. However, *“thou”* and *“thee”* were once the familiar form of address, used for intimates and friends in place of the more formal *“you.”*

Thus, when a Quaker walked down a road in England, crossed paths with the local squire, and addressed his higher-ranking neighbor as *“thou”* instead of the more formal, expected *“you,”* it was akin to calling a member of the local nobility *“mate”* or *“buddy,”* a greeting to which the Quakers’ lordly superiors did not take kindly.

Such practices of friendship—based on the belief that since we are friends of God, we are all friends of one another—were deemed *radical, heretical*, and a *threat* to the good order of society.

Thus, the Quakers found themselves at odds with the authorities, sentenced to prison, and exiled for the crime of being friends. As the movement spread Friends advocated for all sorts of *social justice causes*, including *abolition* and *women’s rights.* It all seemed pretty obvious to them: *friends do not let friends be held in slavery.* Friendship expanded naturally from the most profound *inner experiences* to the world of *social relations* and *politics,* as friendship with God meant a more *just, loving,* and *egalitarian* society.

And so, friendship is not just for *friends.* Friendship is for *the good of the world.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Let’s think about this as we recall the glorious prophecy of *Isaiah,* as repeated in *Matthew’s Gospel:* ***“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.”***

You see, the *Matthew 4* and *Isaiah 9* readings [assigned for this third Sunday of Epiphany] each begin with *geographic references* that are easily overlooked. *Zebulun and Naphtali* are more than Galilean locations. Both words signaled to eighth-century BCE hearers what *Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine* signal to our ears—*the hellishness of war and the darkness engulfing those who live in its aftermath.*

But Zebulun and Naph­tali are also cited as *"crossroads of the nations, where people sitting out their lives in the dark saw a huge light"* (The Message).

Jesus chooses this background, one weighted with historical meaning, as the setting *from which* to carry out his Galilean ministry. *With astonishing boldness* he announces that *he* is the *One* in whom Isaiah's prophecy is at last fulfilled, and who calls *all* to *repent* and *receive* the kingdom of heaven *now* at hand.

These texts are *loaded* with ***Epiphany promise***—what lay *hidden* [in the mystery of God's sovereign reign] is now out in the *open,* offering the *light* of Christ's grace to all in every place and circumstance.

You know, *we* who are ***numbed*** by daily media reports on the plight of people still walking in the thick darkness of *hunger, injustice, crime, disease,* and *futile wars* need ears open to other news. There are places where *Epiphany light* shines through people *who do the best of things in the worst of times.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

For example, in August 2019, at the beginning of the school year here in the United States, a photo showing two little boys holding hands went viral. *Connor,* an autistic boy entering the second grade, was going to school alone for the first time. Although the bus trip went well, when he arrived at the school, he froze with fear and started to cry; he hid in a corner, unable to walk into the building.

*Christian,* another boy, saw Connor and went to comfort him. Then he took Connor by the hand and led him inside the building. *“He found me and held my hand, and I got happy tears,”* Connor later told a reporter when asked about Christian. *“He was kind to me. I was in the first day of school, and I started crying. Then he helped me, and I was happy.”* Connor’s mother said, *“Christian is Connor’s first real friend.”* And Christian’s mother explained, *“They have an inseparable bond.”*

But the other *photographs* accompanying the story were even *more powerful:* a white boy named Connor huddled in a corner, and a black boy named Christian*—[Christian!]—*reaching out to help him. It was an updated American parable, a rewrite of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* for an age of *racial anxiety* and *political division*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In a similar way—this time in a more global context-- in Bethlehem where our tradition says that Jesus was born, *70,000 Palestinians* are walled in by Israeli military occupation and surrounded by illegal settlements on confiscated Palestinian land. Here *Palestinian Lutherans* have defied all odds by building a *wellness center, a medical clinic,* a first-rate *cultural center* hosting local and international events and a *K-12 school* for Muslim and Christian students. [In November of 2011], the first *fine arts college* in the Arab world was opened under their sponsorship. *Dar Al Kalima* ("house of the Word") has 200 full-time students and a thousand more in part-time studies. Despite a dwindling number of Arab Christians, the inclusive organization called *Diyar* ("home") serves women, children, youth and the elderly; *it is the third largest employer in Bethlehem.* Mitri Raheb, the pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church and founding director of Diyar, was asked what keeps him from going crazy under relentless pressures.

*"I start a new project,"* he said—his way of witnessing to the power of Epiphany light that breaks through the thick darkness of the seemingly impenetrable Arab/Israeli conflict.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The point is that *the Epiphany texts* ***point*** *to God's saving reign,* which is continually on the move to the ends of the earth *as well as* to the innermost reaches of the human heart. The texts invite *not* lament over how gloomy things are but lively, imaginative ***following***of the light of Christ through whatever darkness defies it. We become *partners in faith* with those throughout the world whose mission is—*with an Epiphany twist on the pun*—to make *light* of the *darkness.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

You know, the great new fact of our time is that the *center of gravity* in the Christian world has shifted from *Europe and North America* to *Africa, Asia and Latin America.* Consider this*: in the past hour Christian numbers in the Global South have increased by 18,000, while in the Global North Christian numbers have decreased by 3,000.* [this is mostly the result of simple math; differing birth rates, death rates, and longevity (lifespans)] around the world.

However, this is not a simple story about global *“winners”* and *“losers.”* Why? Because people move—migrate—to other parts of the world [just as many of our ancestors did] *and bring their faith with them*. And this is what we are seeing as people migrate in steady numbers from the global south to the global north.

For instance,  since 2013, some 17.2 million migrants from outside the European Union have come to Europe. They have arrived in ones and twos and whole families, often traumatized, and stripped of their worldly possessions, to try to make new homes for themselves in Germany and Spain, the United Kingdom and Italy.

As they arrived, they sparked debates around European culture, values, and religious identity.

Many churches have played key roles in integration. Christians have welcomed immigrants, supplied them with winter coats and basic necessities, helped them learn a new language, and navigated them through the bureaucracies necessary to start their new life.

It was, however, more than just hospitality, according to a 2018 study by the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME). In addition to helping with crucial social services, the Christians’ welcome provided *“symbolic resources for positive self-identification and opportunities for interaction.”*

But that process also led to *the transformation* of European churches. The CCME surveyed 74 Protestant congregations, ranging from state-privileged or *“mainline”* churches to evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which ministered to migrants in 22 countries. It found that migrants had started attending *half* of those churches by 2020. In about a quarter, the migrants are now a notable *minority* of the church. In another 20 percent, the recent migrants had become the *majority.*

This has meant a shift in not only what European churches look like, but how church is done, said [Israel *Oluwole Olofinjana*], a Baptist minister from Nigeria now serving in Essex in the southeast of England.

As churches have witnessed the influx of migrants into their pews and local populations, Olofinjana said they *“have had to rethink who is planning, who is speaking, who is leading.”*

It’s not optional, he said.

*“You cannot be talking about dynamic gospel work in Europe and not think of migrant and diaspora Christians as a key element of what you think and do,”* he said. *“They are becoming central to European theology, wrestling with issues around Christian social ethics, migration issues, and the mission of the church at large.”*

As the migrants do that, they are bringing a fresh perspective to what it means to be Christian in Europe.

*“We’ve been described as ‘missionaries from below,’ because we come from contexts of suffering and trauma, crippling economic struggles and persecution,”* Olofinjana said. *“We have all these challenges and chaotic stories, but amid it all, God’s Spirit is moving. We are here for such a time as this—to help Europe to see what God’s kingdom can look like in the 21st century.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

The exact same thing is happening across North America, as well.

I would like to suggest that *Epiphany awareness* grows when we understand this great new truth, *when* congregations host guests/friends from overseas, or when people in local congregations find ways to reach out in welcome to neighbors who have moved in from distant lands. *Then* hospitality becomes a two-way street. Gifts of *mind and spirit* brought by those who are outwardly different are *fresh treasures* of more lasting value than *gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

We may even begin to understand Matthew 4 in a *new* and *different* light—we may [at long last] be able to set aside the *colonial lenses* [colonizer/colonized] that have so distorted our understanding of such texts for so long. Matthew 4, then, offers *new* glimmers of **Epiphany light** as Jesus *calls Simon, Andrew, James, and John* to discipleship. Here the textual application *illumines* us [*from near and far*] as *prime territory* for the Lord's call to reach those gifted for pastoral teaching or diaconal ministries in the church. Jesus invited four fishermen to discipleship as he found them at their nets; that history of *calling, inviting, and recruiting* disciples reaches down to our day—*in a larger, global context.*

Friends, just as those Quakers, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, [and people representing all of the world’s great faith traditions] made their way to these shores long ago, *so, too,* migrants from the global south today are *following* *God’s light* to the global north—*illuminating, revitalizing, renewing, and expanding* our understanding of God’s ongoing kingdom work—and our place within it.

1. Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence,* Harper One, New York, 2021, pp. 20, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. F. Dean Lueking, *Sunday January 23, 2011,* The Christian Century, January 11, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence,* Harper One, New York, 2021, pp. 12, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. F. Dean Lueking, *Sunday January 23, 2011,* The Christian Century, January 11, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ken Chitwood, *Migrants to Europe Are Changing Churches*, Christianity Today, October 3, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)