

1-5-20

"Step In and Step UP"

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Scripture reference: Isaiah 60:1-3 and Matthew 2:1-12

When Moses was just a few months old, he was placed in a basket and set in the rushes in the river in order to save his life - it had been decreed that in order to control the Israelite population, all male babies would not live. But someone stepped in and Someone stepped up, and Moses lived...

Years later another decree was made - in secret - that a newborn baby boy must not live. This time it was King Herod who directed three wise men on their way to see a baby born in a manger, to return and tell him where He could find this baby. The three wise men that had travelled to see this baby, stepped up and instead of telling King Herod where to find the baby Jesus, they went home the long way and so they never saw him and were unable to tell him where Jesus was... These three wise men, who heard angels speaking to them, Stepped into the light of Christ and they stepped up and Jesus was not harmed...

During WWII Adolph Kaminsky saved 1500-3000 Jewish children by creating false birth certificates and ID's. Children who would otherwise have gone to Concentration camps and would likely NOT have survived...

In 2017, a teacher at an Illinois High School, subdued a young man who was threatening to shoot other students with the gun he carried, children who were vulnerable - children who may not have survived...

Just this past Wednesday in Arizona, a 16 year old boy pushed three younger children out of the way of an oncoming car, and the children were safe... (Phoenix AZ)

These are all examples of people who Stepped In and stepped up. They stepped into the light of Christ, bathed themselves in the power of the Holy Spirit, and stepped up to do the right thing to save the children.

This story repeats itself over and over, every year - every day! We read about the children who are affected by those who see the light of Christ - even if they don't put those words to their motivation for doing the right thing - they step into that light and "step up" and their stories just tug at our hearts - we see these innocent little children and are so thankful that someone and the courage, had the grace, to step up! Someone saw hope and felt love and did something when they saw a child in trouble. What we forget is that children come in all sizes... and all ages... all children are not toddlers and younger... and "trouble" comes in different ways...

We read in Isaiah that "... darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples..." (Isaiah 60:2a) Taken literally, this can happen - we've seen the darkness during times of an eclipse for example. We have seen the darkness over different parts of our world during terrible storms any number of times - a darkness that comes when the light of the sun is blocked from our view - that is literally darkness that covers the earth... Taken NOT so literally, we have probably seen the darkness far more than we want to acknowledge even to ourselves... I mentioned WWII earlier - that was a pretty dark time! War is a pretty dark time. People of this world have been involved in some kind of war, somewhere in the world for centuries - it has affected us here in the United States pretty much non-stop since the Gulf war in 1990 - and some people would argue since Vietnam in the mid 70's... War is an injustice, is a darkness that covers the earth, wouldn't you agree?

War is not the only darkness we face. An injustice of any kind is considered "darkness". Injustices block out the light of Christ. There are injustices of so many kinds happening in so many places! I give you two words, "Human Rights". These two words can bring to mind something different for each person hearing me speak today - and most of what is brought to mind is the violation of basic human rights. Rights like freedom of thought, freedom of expression, food and shelter for all, education... and as written in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we have a responsibility to our fellow human beings. It is stated that "we have a duty to other people..." (articles 29 and 30 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights)... Aren't those same declarations made in our Bibles? We have a responsibility to our fellow human beings, a duty to other people... "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:12-14).

Think about what has happened in your lifetime; think about what is happening in our world, in our country, right now; and think about what our children might face in the future... when you take the literal meaning of "darkness" and combine that with the physical, mental, and emotional definitions of the word... there is darkness covering the earth, and it is over the people.

But there is so much hope! "...but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you..." (Isaiah 60:2b)

Today we celebrate what is called the Epiphany. The word comes from the Greco-Roman context and the literal meaning of the word is to "manifest, show forth, or clarify." And so the early church used this word, epiphany, as a designation for the manifestation, the brilliant appearance of Christ. We are in the season of the Epiphany - the Messiah has come and this is the season of illumination... The season when the light shines for all to see. We can see the light of hope, peace, love, joy, and justice... the light of Christ.

When the light is seen, when a glimpse of what is possible is given, when a vision of the depth of love God has for all of creation is revealed, there is much that we can do, but there is only one proper response. Matthew tells us that the intent of the magi, the intent of the three kings, from the very beginning was to worship. "...We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." And when they got to where the child was, the first thing they did was to worship. "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him." (Matthew 2:10-11) It is only after worship that they got to the gifts.

it's all about seeing the light - recognizing it for what it is - and worshipping our Lord and Savior.. So really we need to understand worship...

We worship each Sunday in Church; but how are we supposed to worship Christ on a daily basis? It is worship when we say a prayer before each meal, when we say our bedtime prayers - and we do those daily. But there is more to worship than church and prayer.

By definition, to "worship" someone means we are "to regard them with great or extravagant respect, honor, or devotion" (Merriam Webster). And how do we generally show respect, honor, and devotion? It's not be doing the opposite of what we see in that person we respect... We behave in the same manner, we follow in the same footsteps, we express the same cares and concerns... As stated in 1 Peter 5 we are to "...shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5: 2-3) Where Christ is concerned, when we "see the light", we step into that light and we step up and do

the right thing... Just as those three wise men did so long ago when they went home on a different route.

We may not be asked to care for and protect a child in the same way that the three kings were asked. It's not likely we will be presented with the same decision made by Adolph Kaminsky during WWII when he saved so many children. And I can only hope that none of us has to subdue a gunman or put ourselves in the path of a moving vehicle in order to protect or save anybody... But seeing the light, stepping into it, and stepping up doesn't have to be so dramatic. The story of someone experiencing hope, feeling love, seeing the light of Christ, is repeated in individual decisions people make in everyday situations. The decision to step up to stop someone from bullying; the decision to visit someone who is homebound or care for those who are somehow at a disadvantage. Something as seemingly insignificant as the decision to contribute one loaf of bread or one package of Ramen Noodles to the food pantry... each of these is an example of someone who saw the light, stepped into it, and stepped up to do the right thing, to protect in some way, the children of God...

The three Kings we are introduced to in our stories of Christ's birth, are perfect examples for us of Stepping in and Stepping up. They literally saw light in the darkness when they saw that star and they followed it to where the baby Jesus lay in a manger. While they were there, they saw the light of Christ reflected in the faces of his parents Joseph and Mary, and reflected in the eyes of the baby himself. They stepped into that light and they stepped up and did the right thing.

During this time of the Epiphany, it is our goal, as a people of faith, to connect with new things, see fresh new beginnings, find new opportunities that are provided by God for us, the children of God. As we do these things, we will embody the earthly presence of Christ, see the light of Christ shown in justice, reconciliation, peace, hope, and love. And we will accept our responsibilities as children of God to "put on love", (Colossians 3:14) protect each other, and worship our Lord each and every day by stepping into that light and stepping up to protect care for each other. AMEN