

THE
Episcopal
CHURCH



Office of Public Affairs

“We Must Reclaim Epiphany”
The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry

January 6, 2022

This sermon transcript has been lightly edited for flow and clarity

Preacher:

Now in the name of our loving, liberating, and life-giving God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—amen.

Preacher:

Good afternoon.

Congregation:

Good afternoon.

Preacher:

We are here at The Church of the Epiphany on January the 6th, 2022, the feast of the Epiphany, for a reason. I want to thank the bishop of this diocese, Bishop Mariann Budde, and the rector, clergy, the vestry of the people of this parish, and the Reverend Glenna Huber, for welcoming us.

Preacher:

And more than just a welcome, they made this possible. So, I want to thank y'all. We are here in Epiphany Church for a reason. We're here on the feast of the Epiphany, January the 6th, 2022, for a reason. Let me say it this way: it never occurred to me in my 68 years of living, that it would be necessary for me to stand up in front of the people of God and declare that it is necessary to reclaim Epiphany. But one year ago, on the feast of the Epiphany, January the 6th, 2021, darkness descended the land. And Epiphany was eclipsed at the capitol of the United States of America.

Preacher:

And it occurred to me a few months ago that whatever else goes on this day, we who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ must reclaim Epiphany. Reclaim the message. Reclaim the messenger. Prepare witness to His light. Epiphany, at its deepest roots, is about the light and life and love of God. And what happened here in this country that we love a year ago was not about light and love and life. And we are better than that. And we must declare it. And we must find a way.

Preacher:

This day is about light. It's about, as John said, "the light shining in the darkness." And the darkness did not, cannot, and will not overcome it. Now my brother who's interpreting for me today. . .I want you to know, this young brother is in seminary. So I want y'all to thank him. Just say, "Thank you, Brother."

Congregation:

Thank you, brother.

Preacher:

Thank you, my brother.

Preacher:

But that is true. Epiphany is about light. The light that is God. The light that is the God who the Bible says is love. And the light of the God who is love—who shows us the way to life in this world. If you don't believe me, it's in the Bible. It's in the book. The Hebrew passages of prophecy that have been applied by the Christian tradition to Epiphany speak of it. Isaiah said it this way: "Arise, shine. Your light has come. And the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you."

Preacher:

In another place, he said it this way: "The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light. On them, the light has shined. For unto us, a child is born. Unto us, a son is given. And the government—Washington, D.C., do you hear me? —and the government, authority, power in this world... And the government shall be upon his shoulders." And he will not be called "violence." He will not be called "hatred." He will not be called "bigotry." He will not be called "injustice." He will not be called "untruth." He will be called, "wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Preacher:

We must reclaim Epiphany. That is why we are here. We must reclaim it by choosing the light. Now, I'm 68 years old. I've been around a little while. Not as long as some, but a little longer than the wonderful children who brought the gifts to the Christ child. And brought the Magi, the three Magi... the Bible doesn't say it was three but there were three gifts, and so we come to the conclusion it must be three.

Preacher:

And there they are bringing their gifts. “We Three Kings of Orient are bearing gifts from travels afar.” I know the Epiphany is about the story of the Magi coming to worship. I also know that it's about the coming of the love of God into the world created by love and community. Because we sometimes forget that as Matthew knows the story, the Magi were not just Gentiles. These brothers, they were way out there in the religious fringe. I mean, they were way out on the fringe. That's why the Bible says they had to come from afar.

Preacher:

Uh-huh (affirmative). But there's something about this Way of Love that comes in harmony, which is Jesus. That creates a Beloved Community where the old slaves used to sing, “There’s plenty good room, plenty good room, plenty good room for all God's children.”

Preacher:

Oh, you got to give my brother over here a hand, he's all right. But behind the story of the wise men, the magi...is the story of the struggle.

Preacher:

Between the light that shines in the darkness and that darkness often seeks to overcome it.

Preacher:

And the epiphany is a reminder that this light of God will shine in the darkness.

Preacher:

And the darkness did not, cannot, and will not overcome it. And we must remember that no matter what.

Preacher:

Last year, we were living in some darkness. We were still in the midst of the COVID pandemic before we had ever heard even of Omicron. We were just coming out of a contentious election. We were facing into deep divisions among us, and slowly realizing that there were those who were fostering those divisions among us. We were, and still are, in the midst of a racial reckoning—reckoning with our past as a nation, and our sins. Even in this nation that I love.

Preacher:

But then a deeper darkness descended about midway through the afternoon. And we all saw it. We turned on our televisions. I don't care whether you watch CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, public radio—well, you can't watch public radio. . . never mind. Public television. We all saw it. We saw the Capitol of the United States of America breached; the temple of democracy desecrated.

Preacher:

And darkness descended this land. But not only the temple of democracy: we saw symbols of Christianity used to perpetuate the desecration. We heard the police officers, Black and Brown police officers, who spoke not only of the violence against them, but found themselves called names of indignity and bigotry and hatred.

Preacher:

Darkness descended in this land. To this democracy and a challenge to this faith. When the darkness descends, it is salutary to remember, that when the darkness comes, that is the moment of decision, as it was the start of the night of the Passover. When it's darkest, that is when you must decide. That is what Dr. King taught when he preached a sermon called, "There's Always a Knock at Midnight."

Preacher:

When the darkness descends, it is a moment of choice. There's an old poem written by James Russell Lowell in the 19th Century. Forgive the gender biased language—blame him, not me. He was writing in the 19th century but transcend that with me just for a moment. And this man, who was an Abolitionist, in the midst of the struggle to end chattel slavery, who did much of his work before, during, and after the Civil War, said this, and I quote: "Once to every man and nation/Comes the moment to decide/In the strife of truth and falsehood/For the good or evil side."

Preacher:

He also went on to say, "Truth may be on the scaffold/And wrong may be on the throne/But the scaffolds raise the future/And behind the dim unknown/behind the dusty darkness/standeth God within the shadow/keeping watch above His own."

Preacher:

The darkness is a moment to decide, and we must choose light. We who are Christians must choose it.

We must choose it by reclaiming Christianity itself. I'm talking about a Christianity that is worthy of the name "Christ-ianity."

Preacher [to interpreter]:

Yes, I just made that up on you just now, I want you all to know that. You're all right, brother.

Preacher:

Yeah. I'm talking about Christianity that is named after Jesus the Christ, the light of God's love who came into the world. And we who are Christian, we must reclaim this faith. The way of Jesus is not about hatred. The way of Jesus is not about bigotry.

Preacher:

The way of Jesus is not about narrow-mindedness. The way of Jesus is not about untruth.

The way of Jesus is not about putting anybody down; it's about raising everybody up.

Preacher:

What did Jesus' mama say? “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my Savior. For He that is mighty has looked upon me, his lowly servant, and raised me up.

Preacher:

No, no, we must reclaim Christianity and dare to live it and bear witness to it.

Preacher:

A Christianity that is not about power or empire. A Christianity that is not about position or status. A Christianity—excuse me for saying it this way—a Christianity that is about what Jesus taught us. Blessed are the poor and the poor in spirit. Blessed are you who are merciful and compassionate. Blessed are you who seek God's justice in this world.

Preacher:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I've got to stay away from you cause, I remember, it just occurred to me, y'all masked.

Preacher:

Love your enemies, bless those who hurt you. As St. Paul said, interpreting Jesus, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Preacher:

We must claim our Christianity, grounded in the Jesus, who said, building on the work of Moses. “You shall love the Lord, your God, and your neighbor as yourself. On these hang on the law and the prophets.” Jesus, the king of love, my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never. *That* Jesus is our God. That Jesus is our teacher. That Jesus is our Lord, and if it doesn't look like Him—if it doesn't look like love—I don't care how holy and sanctimonious it sounds, I don't care how much [inaudible], if it doesn't look like love, it's not about God and cannot call itself Christian.

Preacher:

We must reclaim Epiphany, and we who are Christians must decide the light. But it's not just we who are Christian. We who are citizens, whatever your religious faith or convictions may be. We have to be sharing some values and ideas, some principles that matter.

Preacher:

Thomas Jefferson was a great mind, but the brother had some issues. Let's just keep it real. I've been around long enough to know everybody's got skeletons in their closet. Everybody's got some issues. The Bible says all have sinned and all fall short of the glory

of God. But in spite of his hypocrisy, his words were true. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men, that all people, all children of God, are created equal.

Preacher:

Whatever the hypocrisy in his life, the libretto of his words, that's an idea we hold we the people. Abraham Lincoln said it this way, "Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought upon this continent, a new nation . . ." I know we've got to be mindful that there were some Indigenous folk here before we got here. So [Lincoln] was wrong about that, but he was right about this: ". . .conceived a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men, that all people, are created equal."

Preacher:

And if you still don't believe old Abe Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address, maybe you'll believe when you were in the second grade. At least, when I was in the second grade, I think Dwight Eisenhower was president then. That was a little while ago. But we all had to stand up, remember that?

Preacher:

And we would turn, y'all remember this? And turn and face the flag, and put our hand over our heart, and we would say, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic. . ." not to the individual, not to any political party, not to any political persuasion ". . .to the republic for which it stands. One nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice. . ." not for some, not for some, not just for me, not just for women, not just the straight folk, not just the white folk, not just the Brown folk, not just the Black folk, not just the Asian folk, not just the Indigenous folk, not just the Christians, not just the Jews, not just the Hindus, not just the Muslims, "liberty and justice for all." That's America. That's where we stand. And we, as citizens, must reclaim the light.

Preacher:

We came here to Epiphany Church for a reason. We must reclaim Epiphany and claim the light. We who are Christian must claim the light of Christ. And we who are citizens must reclaim the light and the torch of the lady in New York harbor: "America, give me your tired. Give me your poor. Give me your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free."

Preacher:

And when we reclaim the light, then we will be a shining city on a hill. In 1977—and with this I'll sit down—I was a young seminarian like my brother. I had as much hair as this guy, and it wasn't gray. I was as thin as he is. And so I applied to go to the Diocese of North Carolina as a seminarian intern. Bishop Thomas Augustus Fraser accepted my letter, and I flew to North Carolina on Piedmont Airlines and eventually found myself seminarian in charge and director of a summer day camp vacation Bible school that went for two months for children in the Black community of Rocky Mount. This is 1977. Camp was located at the Church of the Epiphany in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. It's no longer there, but it was one of our historically Black congregations. And while I was

there, not only did I run the summer camp and do Sunday services, but I visited folk in the congregation.

Preacher:

One day I went with one of the older members. And I don't know why I asked her this, but I did. I said, "How come you got the name 'Epiphany?'"

Preacher:

And she had a think for a minute. And she said, "I don't really remember how we came up with the name Epiphany, but it's in the Bible." I said, "Well, okay, but what was the name of the congregation before it was called Epiphany?"

Preacher:

And she answered immediately: "We were named The Church of the Holy Hope."

Preacher:

Not until this year did it ever occur to me that Epiphany is our holy hope. It is our hope to redeem this faith that we've taken. And it is our hope to redeem this nation that we love, that in spite of our priorities, in spite of our differences, in spite of our arrogance, we will learn how to be one nation, many diverse people, all children of God, living with liberty and justice for all.

Preacher:

We must choose the light. And with this I am going to sit down. I was nervous Bishop [Budde], about getting here, primarily because of the flights. I was in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for the funeral and burial of a giant in our churches.

Preacher:

Remember Dr. Harold Lewis? Who actually served here at one point in time is, in the modern church, many, many years ago.

Preacher:

And as we were taking his ashes and concluding the Eucharist, the choir began to sing a hymn—the words of Thomas Dorsey, which I've heard many, many times before. But never had I heard them in the context of January the 6th and of my deep prayer for this nation.

Preacher:

And I realized it's an Epiphany again, which is:

“Precious Lord, take my hand

Lead me on, let me stand

We are tired, we're weak, we're worn

Through the storm, through the night

Lead us on to the light
Take our hand, precious Lord
And lead us home”

Amen.

Audience:

Amen

On the web: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/tolooklikejesus/>

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