Epiphany is January 6, but on this Sunday before it we focus on the words of Isaiah and the Magi following the star. We are called to be a light to the nations. Epiphany means manifestation and it refers to the way Christ is made known to the Gentiles.

First, a word about our texts from the prophet and the Gospel. Israel has finally returned to their homeland after 70 years in Babylonian exile. They are despondent about the condition of the land and their feeling of lost glory. Isaiah declares the word of the Lord: Arise and shine, for your light has come. They are to lift their heads and set about the work of being a people worthy of admiration. It won’t happen all at once, but if they will attend to the law of the Lord, the peoples of the earth will note of their witness to the way of God.

And then we see that the one who is himself the Light of the world is born in Bethlehem. Wise men from afar see the light in the night sky and follow it to him. Christ is born to Israel and the light of God shines from and through them. The nations worship the child, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It’s a beautiful picture: the election of Israel to be a light to the world and the coming of the light in Christ through them.

So, here’s the question of the day for this new year: If the church today can rightly claim to share in the promises of God to Israel that the glory of God will shine upon us and radiate through us so that the nations will be drawn to our light, how will we rise and shine in these dark days of discouragement so that we will be an Epiphany Church?

I wrote a whole sermon on this subject that addressed the state of the church in America right now. I scrapped it altogether and started over because it sounded more like a screed than a sermon. Guess I needed to get it out of my system, don’t you know?! I have a humbler aim in this one: to call on us as a congregation to do what we can, since we can only control our own obedience. Baptists always start with the small c—church—before moving to the big C—
Church. So, let’s focus on ourselves today, Wilshire, and find ways to contribute to the renewal of the Church by aiding the renewal of the Baptist church in our time.

Using images of light, I want us to attend to a few things. First, *keep a steady flame.*

I don’t know if you caught it, but in our prerecorded virtual Christmas Eve service, we had trouble with the Christ candle. The wick had burned to a nub and the fire kept going out. On the other hand, some churches will gather all their Christmas trees on Epiphany for a huge bonfire to symbolize the church’s being a light to the world.

A healthy church lives between these extremes. We need the Spirit’s Pentecostal power among us that keeps the fire going, but we don’t need bonfires of vanity that call attention to ourselves. The constancy of spiritual fire will do just fine to bring warmth and light to the world.

Every church is facing the same challenge of staying connected during this time of COVID restrictions. Ours is no different.

It’s easy to lose touch with one another when we can’t come together to worship and pray and study the Scripture as we always have. It’s too easy to lose touch with God as well. Our spiritual lives require attention, and our communal life is God’s way of keeping us alive in the Spirit.

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The church exists as a reminder that God’s light shines through a people dedicated to being light. The State is not the light, and individuals are not themselves the light. If we remain connected to Christ and to each other in these times of discouragement, the world will see a way forward through us.

And that leads to the second thing: *our relationship to power.* The church gets its power to bear the light from Christ, not from Caesar.

Baptists came into being as a form of church that refused to grant spiritual power to the government or to seek power from of it. We pioneered the idea of the separation of church and state. We believed government should establish and protect religious liberty—not just for us, but for every other religion and for those with no religion.
How things have changed. If you ask the average person whether Baptists stand for religious liberty today, they will look at you as if you are crazy. Too many Baptists nowadays long to be powerbrokers in Washington. They like to go to the White House and secure the special favor of the President. These Baptists want religious liberty for themselves and want to deny it to others. They have fallen into the idolatry of Christian nationalism and the light of Christ has dimmed in proportion to their increased secular power.

Every time a nation tries to become Christian by use of worldly power, the light of Christ is dimmer. When King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in the fifteenth century set upon to make their country a Christian nation, they wanted to make Spain a light to the world to the glory of God. But to do so, their Reconquista forced all Jews and Muslims to convert or be tortured and killed. They set Columbus on his journey to find gold and bring it back to them, rather than have the nations bring their gold of their own accord. Their Conquistadors enslaved native peoples and raped the riches of their lands.

Today, you can go visit Spain’s empty cathedrals and find a country where the light of Christ is barely a flicker.

One of our most visionary Baptists, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., got it right when he said: *The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.* There’s a reckoning coming for Baptists that have lost our way in this regard. We have to return to our calling to live as the light and not try to blind others by it.

We do that by serving the common good, tending to the poor and marginalized in society, loving our neighbor. Our politics should be the politics of Jesus—rescuing the perishing, caring for the dying, liberating the oppressed, standing for justice, offering profligate mercy and kindness to all.

Which leads to this: light is a metaphor for truth, and *we must be committed to the truth* wherever we find it.

For one thing, that means not falling for or promoting conspiracy theories based on lies.
or claiming that inconvenient truths are just hoaxes. Facts are stubborn: they should never be bent to fit what we want them to mean. Being light should lead to enlightenment, never to making the clear unclear for our own benefit. If the church won’t bow to truth, we shouldn’t expect people to bow to the one who says he is the way, the truth and the life.

That also means trusting science, not denying it. Science is another way God is making the truth known. Too many Baptists think they have an absolute purchase on the truth because the Bible tells them all they need to know about everything. They are suspicious of science and see it as a secular means of denying the church its freedom.

We see some Baptist churches declaring the coronavirus a hoax and holding services without masks, only to see their own people come down with the deadly virus. The reports of subsequent deaths just break my heart. Take away just these Baptist skeptics from the last nine months—never mind all the other Evangelicals, and we might have seen a different result from all the illness and death that has plagued us as a nation. All truth is God’s truth wherever it is found and by whatever means.

Just this past week, we have seen another sad example of denying truth when the six presidents of the Southern Baptist seminaries declared critical race theory to be contrary to biblical truth. It must be rejected by Christians, they say, because it was developed by non-Christians using tools of social analysis. Critical race theory points out how racism is embedded in the systems of law, education, economics and politics and must be addressed as such instead of just directing people to change their hearts. Black pastors and churches are leaving the SBC in light of this rejection and calling for the church’s repentance for its complicity with white supremacy. It’s about time.

This is a far cry from the declaration of the English minister John Robinson who preached to the departing Puritans in a sermon in 1619 before they boarded the Mayflower: For I am very confident the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of His holy Word. More truth and light! God is still shining more truth and light to us, if we would only look and listen.
We can’t answer for all Christians or all Baptists, but we can answer for ourselves. We can keep a steady flame by staying connected to God and one another. We can choose the politics of Jesus over worldly power. And we can embrace the truth wherever we find it and whatever it costs us.

I am proud of this church. Wilshire means something to people. It gives them hope. And it gives me hope for the church to be your pastor. Let’s continue to rise and shine, people of God. Your light has come. Amen.