

January 8, 2017 Epiphany (transferred)  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Matthew 2:1-12

### **Blinking Lights**

Back in the late 90's I lived and worked at a church in New York City, in Manhattan, in the East Village in the Lower East Side. At that time, that neighborhood, immortalized in the musical RENT, was just starting to make the turn from seedy to trendy. Not so long before it had been a good place to buy heroin, and it still retained a grimy look and feel, but expensive restaurants were starting to pop up, and the blocks bustled with an eclectic mix of people.

The church that I was at (I was an administrator there, I had not yet become a pastor) was small, but it had an impressive community outreach: a daily soup kitchen and food pantry and referrals program, all run by a handful of staff and an array of volunteers, many of whom were former or current recipients of the outreach programs. We received and gave out a lot. One Advent we got a somewhat strange donation of several Christmas trees. (Were we supposed to hand out Christmas trees out to homeless people? People give all sorts of strange things, especially to churches). We put the largest tree up outside of the church, in the small yard in front. We didn't have a stand for it, and it was rather big and somewhat lumpy in shape, so we propped it up by stacking various cement blocks at the base of its trunk. I think that part was my idea, or maybe I thought to straighten it out with a rope at the top. Despite, or because, of the cement block base the tree tilted, and so we tied a rope from the top it to an overhanging branch of another, living tree that leaned over it. Then we hung strands of lights of various types and colors. The lights certainly weren't coordinated, nor was their hanging. They were draped in clumps on the Christmas tree and along the fence that outlined the small front yard. Some of the strands blinked or twinkled, others didn't. Sometimes a whole long line would go off, and then go on again. Maybe by now you have something of a picture of what this looked like. Haphazard is one way to put it.

But then one evening, as my husband Tim and I were walking home from the subway station to our apartment next to the church—maybe we had been out shopping for presents, or at some holiday gathering, I don't remember where we were coming from but I clearly remember what we saw: people gathered at the church fence, pointing at the tree and commenting to one another, with animation, and wonder. "Oh," I thought, my heart catching a little, a tender Christmassy feeling rising within me. "Those lights that I disparaged have caught their attention; and they have been stopped by a sense of the holy."

But then Tim and I approached yet closer, and then came the second revelation—we saw what the people were pointing at and talking about: a large family of rats—and I mean the word "large" to modify both the individual rats and the size of their group—a large family of rats had made their home in the cement blocks beneath the tree and were scuttling back and forth from that home base to a hole in the church wall that, no doubt, led directly to the church basement, where the food for the soup kitchen and panty were stored. Flashing, blinking lights: see the rats.

Today we are celebrating the feast of Epiphany, a festival of the church that celebrates, among other things, light: the star that flashes, twinkles, shines, guiding the wise men to the place where the child was (Matthew 2: 9), the light that shines in the darkness, the true light that enlightens everyone, coming into the world (John 1:5, 9), the one who will grow up and declare, "I am the light of world." (John 8:12) It is good, on this feast of light, to admit that a gentle glow

is not the only revelation of God's advent with us, to note the seedy side that flashing strands uncover. Lights can also illuminate the rats.

Take King Herod. This feast of the church is also sometimes called Three Kings Day, but Herod is actually the only one identified as a king in today's Epiphany gospel reading. The other people, not necessarily three but probably guys, are simply called wise. Herod is a king, the text says, but he's really a rat. Herod operates in secret, connives. Herod hears that a hoped for baby has been born, and he hears a threat to his own power, and takes violent measures to avoid that at all cost. If you keep reading past where today's reading ends, you find out that after the wise men leave, Herod orders that all the babes in Bethlehem be killed. Calling him a rat is much too kind.

Inside deals for self-preservation; disregard, contempt for the lives of others; fear that leads to violence, the slaughter of innocence; leaders who do not deserve the name—it is all too contemporary a story. Call it corruption, call it evil. You may have been spared the experience of it at its most monstrous, or maybe not. Call it darkness, call it sin. You have seen it, experienced it. We all have at some level.

Maybe most especially now, after twelve days of Christmas, we see it. After the family gatherings—and estrangements; after all the gifting—and the still remaining lack. After the glowing evening, the grimy day. Now, especially, it may be all that much harder to catch on to those tender Christmassy feelings. Now, especially, a week into the new year, as the cultural messages about buying stuff have shifted to messages about improving yourself (also, probably, through buying stuff), now, especially, we may be ready to recognize, we may be ready to see things as they are. Even if you get it all, even if you do it all, even if you keep all the self-improving resolutions, even if you outmaneuver all threats to your existence, even then, to use the words of theologian Walter Brueggemann, even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat.

So it is that I return to that scene in front of that little church in New York City: all those haphazard decorations, a haven for undesirables, hung up by all kinds of messed up people. Now a pastor myself, I look back at that scene. I think: that's what churches are, when we are honest. I say that, not with disparagement, but with a sense of wonder, and holiness. That's what we are when we are honest, and when we are at our best. We hang blinking lights, unevenly, blinking lights that reveal the unevenness in our world and in our very selves. We are blinking lights, flashing strands that are uncoordinated and often ill-timed, and something else, too, something of a piece with the true light, that enlightens everyone, that was coming into the world.

That light, the light that comes into the world in Christ, reveals that all is not good. That light shines in the darkness. That is honesty, and promise: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it, as the Christmas gospel says. And the star shined above the place where the child lay, as the Epiphany gospel says, and those who are wise follow it there, and bring their gifts, their strange gifts, and they are received, and they are overwhelmed with joy.